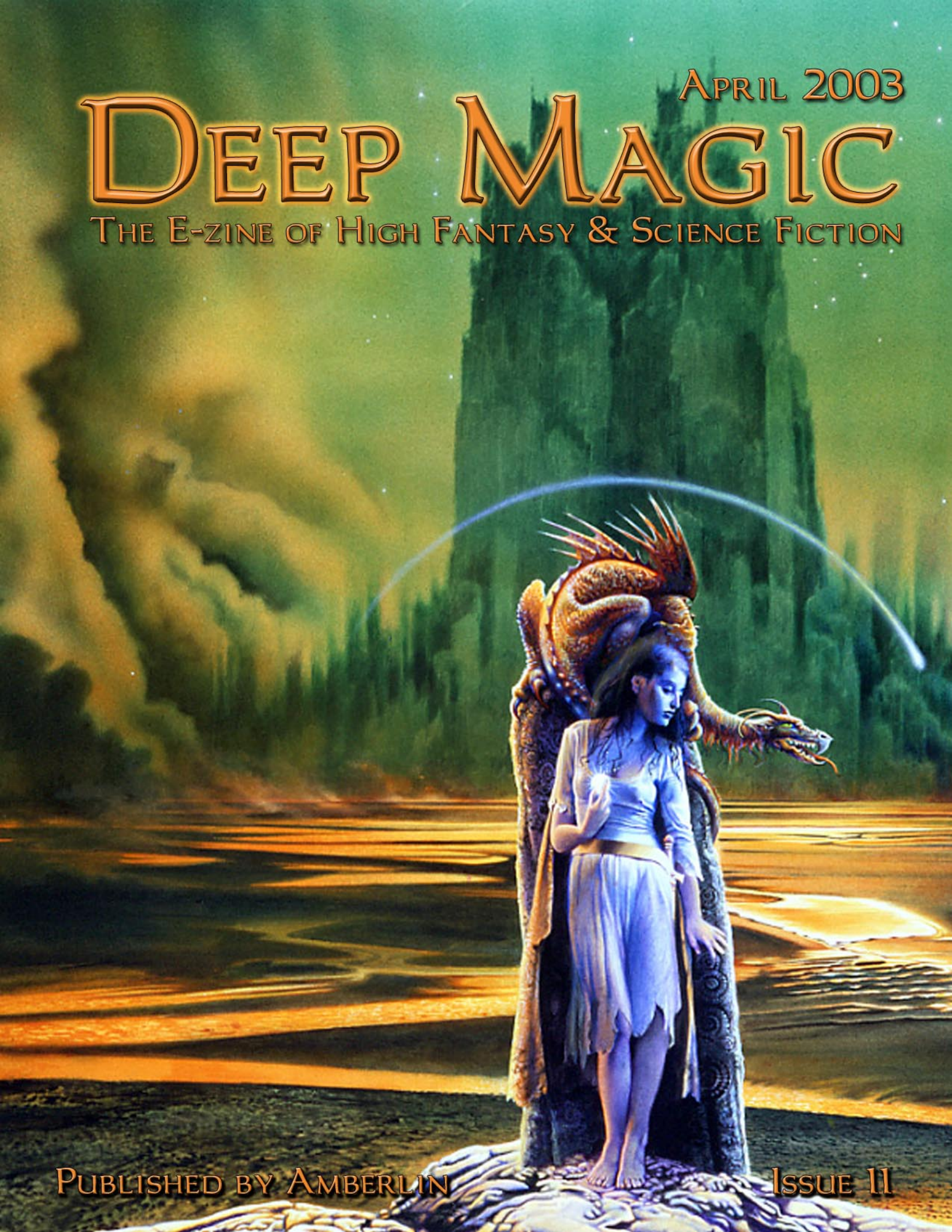
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Website: http://www.deep-magic.net

Feedback: feedback@deep-magic.net

Cover by Geoff Taylor
"Sacred Seven"

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Note from the Editors

April 2003

Welcome back to another month of outstanding fantasy and science fiction art and literature. We hope you were able to navigate our website detours without too much trouble as we changed hosting companies and URLs last month. With those changes, you may notice a new look to portions of our website, including the configuration of the Message Board. You may need to re-register to post on our boards, but the process is quick and painless, and as always, our e-zine and services remain free of charge.

This month, we are pleased to roll out a third novel, *Found Things* by M. Thomas. You may recognize M. as the author of "Slaying the Dragon" (August, 2002), "Magic Chicken" (February, 2003), and numerous articles on writing. We offer a satisfying helping of novels this month as both *Tears of Minya,* by Jeff Wheeler, and *Procyx,* by O.R. Savage continue. We are also proud of the three short stories featured this month: "Skygrave," "The Lost Unicorn," and "Circle of the Great Owl."

We have been talking about the publication of last year's serialized novel, *Landmoor*, by Jeff Wheeler for several months now. Well, we are closing in on a publication date and will announce its release soon. Last month, editor Jeremy Whitted offered insight into laying out a book for publication. This month, we thought our readers might be interested in more information about the "print-on-demand" industry. We bring two articles that articulate this aspect of the industry well.

Of course, you have already noticed the beautiful art on the cover of this issue, titled *Sacred Seven*. Find much more inside and read about the artist who created it, Geoff Taylor. We also offer more intriguing art in our artist profile of Justin Phillips.

Last month, we issued a challenge to tell your friends about this publication and invite them to subscribe. We specifically identified Wales. We are happy to announce that more than one reader took us up on the challenge. You will certainly be pleased to know that our publication is regularly downloaded in that beautiful country. What other corners of the world can we reach? The internet is a wonderful thing and it pleases our staff that so many people from across the world enjoy this publication. Every month we find announcements for Deep Magic in many languages on various websites. Thank you, and enjoy the read.

The Editors
DEEP MAGIC

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Last month we invited authors to exact literary revenge on someone from their past, without committing libel. We were entertained by the entries we received and believe you will enjoy the two entries selected for publication below. Please take the time to look at this month's challenge and send your submissions by the 20th to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net. For last month, the submission is below.

Streena by Duane B. Frazure
Andrei and Antonius by Anne M. Stickel

We also want to mention that writing challenge submissions are rarely edited by our staff. These submissions are exercises and not meant to be polished.

April 2003 Writing Challenge

Sometimes we come up with a writing challenge that really gets the creative juices flowing. Other times...not so much. We thought we'd go back to our first challenge and expand it a bit. We have been particularly proud of the cover art featured in Deep Magic. The images have been vibrant and thought-provoking. In that spirit, your challenge is to pick any cover art featured in Deep Magic and let it inspire you. Send us a narrative about that cover. Please identify the issue of the cover art that inspired you. Your submission can be a descriptive paragraph, a very short story, or a portion of a chapter from a novel you haven't written yet. You can give a background story about the picture, or describe what is soon to come. Just keep it under 750 words.

March 2003 Writing Challenge: The challenge this month is to exact literary revenge upon an individual you would love to eviscerate. Or, celebrate the nobility you find in a friend by weaving him into a scene. One word of caution: please do not name names, and keep the resemblance sufficiently generic that you do not risk a libel suit in this exercise. Feel free to add a note to the end to explain your motivation. Please keep your submissions under 500.

Streena
By Duane B. Frazure

Like most witches, Streena was hideously ugly, evil, and smelled like rotting onions baked on a pallet of sheep dung. When you got to know her. Until then, she was mysterious, alluring, and in all ways, not herself. But the question about Streena that could not be answered by the minds of mortal men was how to get rid of her. Once she got her icy claws into an unsuspecting man, he could sooner pluck a cloud from the sky than remove her from his life.

Those long odds did not stop the firm-jawed Darren from trying. First, Darren tried moving to a different city under the cover of darkness... only to find her waiting for him on his front porch at the break of day. Then, he tried expelling her with all manner of logic, reason, and pleas for mercy. She merely cackled at his feeble efforts, digging her claws deeper into him. At last, he tried ignoring her, which was the greatest mistake of all. Once truly provoked, the spells she unleashed caused more pain than had she peeled back his skin and placed hot coals underneath.

Darren was about to give in and accept the doom and ruin of his life when a spark of an idea tickled in his mind. One late Sunday morning, he danced about town on Streena's strings, running errands for her of one sort and then another. The spell that bound him chaffed great read sores around his wrists. At once, he saw his chance and took it. Before her all-seeing gaze seized upon him and discerned what he was about, he ran as fast as he could to the local cathedral. Expecting the bolt of her wrath to strike him dead, he ran faster and faster until he reached the ornate double doors. Flinging them wide, he jumped through to the tiled floor beyond and yelled, "Sanctuary!"

Her howls and rage turned the day to night and the calm to tempest. Outside. But the walls of the cathedral stood. Lying breathless on the floor, Darren looked up to see a smiling priest, and then another. And yet another still. The first extended a hand and said, "Welcome home, my brother." Darren smiled when he saw the familiar red chaffs on the priest's wrist.

Author's Note: This parody of an ex-girlfriend was just too fun to write.

Andrei and Antonius

By Anne M. Stickel

How Andrei regretted his obedience to his mother's advice. As a result, his life was about to end. He pictured her again giving her admonition, "Keep your mouth shut, pay attention, do as you're told, and you'll succeed. Trust none with your thoughts."

When the Kursk was raised and they sent her his body for burial, instead of slapping at him with her babushka, she'd be weeping into it. If he made it to the surface, he'd never hear her again. Accidental detonations aboard the sub had deafened the few crewmen who'd fled to her last watertight hold. He was glad he couldn't hear the moans of the injured. Their reek was bad enough.

Andrei's fading companions were scribbling hasty notes to their families, and sealing them into waterproof pouches. But Andrei, who had no one but her, was too busy cursing his mother to bother. After their emergency lights died, they'd lie helplessly huddled together in the dark. Those who'd taken turns pounding on the hull to alert possible rescuers soon realized the need to conserve both strength and air. The little water saved was doled out to burn victims. *What a waste! If I alone were left alive, I'd have all the supplies to myself…*

"Andrei, Andrei, wake up! I'm allowed to take only the one chosen." The cold metal dungeon floor hurting his feet, Friar Antonius wiped a sweaty brow with the hem of his rough brown robe. He shook the pale haired sailor lying apart from the heap of dead and dying men.

Rousted from his cell in thirteenth century Padua to jump through the years on a special journey, Antonius had heard, "Go, Servant, and find where my light is least under the sea of the future."

At the sailor's shocked look, Antonius placed warm, glowing hands over the man's ears to restore him. Although the Friar spoke Latin, he knew that Andrei would be granted comprehension. "Take my hand, Andrei. On my way to Morocco to seek martyrdom of the Saracens a few years ago I too almost drowned, but was detoured by the Spirit to Sicily. I've been sent to save you, just as I myself was saved. Hurry! Your time here is over."

"Am I going to die…or…am I already dead?" cried Andrei, breaking his mother's rule for the first time.

"You weren't ready for death," said Antonius, "never having learned how to live. I'm to teach you, so that you'll be ready to step nobly into the next life." The Friar gestured, and Andrei's soiled uniform became a long brown robe.

"Why me?" asked Andrei, taking Antonius' plump hand and stepping over the threshold into a tiny cell in Padua. By candlelight, he was motioned to sit on a stool made of books.

"Among your companions, your light was dimmest," answered Antonius, adding, "I'm always led to those most in need. Now, trust me, my child, with your thoughts. And I'll trust you with my truth."

Author's Note: This is dedicated to the Russian sailors lost in the Bering Sea aboard the Sub Kursk. How I wish that legendary finder, Saint Anthony, could have rescued at least one of them in his mystical time travels. Andrei's mother's philosophy reflects that of a person who aced me out of a lab job, thus forcing me to become a writer and artist.

Poll: The Best Bits of Deep Magic

With spring upon us, the staff at Deep Magic would like to do a little cleaning and request your help. This month, we are trying to tidy up the e-zine by finding out which sorts of stories and articles you most enjoy. We hope to weed out some of the parts of our e-zine that are not as valuable and focus more time and pages to the writing that pleases our readers most. Your time and effort in voting are greatly appreciated. We use the information you provide to shape our e-zine into a more pleasing product. Give us a hand, will ya?

Go to the website and vote!

Accoring to our March 2003 poll, the following is true about our typical Deep Magic reader:

- reads Deep Magic on a desktop computer
- reads Deep Magic on a Windows-based machine
- reads Deep Magic at home
- loves 'every bit' of Deep Magic
- favorite color is green

See the results and percentages here.

Our poll sponsored by csPoller. They provided us a great poll script, so please go to their site and check out their great scripts. They offer a wide selection of quality cgi-scripts, and their support is fantastic.

Skygrave
By Margo Lerwill

The hatch froze in place, only half-open. The runes around the locking mechanism faded from angry red to amber to onyx-black again. Aili pressed the bronze ring, the pass-safe, harder against the indentation between the scythe-like symbols, but all she felt was the barest tug on her own meager energies. The charge on the ring failed by degrees, until it felt empty and dead in her hand.

Why did one challenge always end in another?

Aili let the ring fall from her fingers and dangle from the knotted chain around her neck. She flailed out for a handhold in the tangled greenery and roots beyond the hatch. Tremors rippled up and down her legs from the effort of bracing her back against the opposite side of the narrow stone shaft, from inching her way upward in the cold, grimy darkness. She cursed her weakness then and now. The Progenitors who had built the network of stone tunnels beneath the Dome would have levitated to the top of the shaft and thrown back the hatch without so much as touching it. No one possessed that kind of magic anymore.

Indeed the Dome was so vast, so many leagues across and connected by tunnels to so many other Domes, that she could forget it was man-made, magic-made, unchanging night.

Scrapped and bruised from numerous falls, torn by the sword-sharp legs of man-sized arachs and their kith of nightmare tunnel crawlers, stinking of fungus and old blood that was and was not her own, Aili wriggled through the hatchway. The life of a professional scavenger—proper title: Traveler, mobile subsect of the Barriers, the Tainted Children, guardians against the very magic that polluted their veins—had left Aili lean, even scrawny. She felt thankful for it now.

She got a face-full of wet, chilly grass and dirt when she landed, and she gladly filled her lungs with the scent. The earthy musk unsettled her stomach, however, making her respite too brief. Her back bowed without her consent. A convulsion dragged her to her hands and knees. She vomited repeatedly, again, hoping this was the last trace of arach blood fighting its way out of her.

At last, the final ounce of bile in her miserable body lay expelled in the grass, save for a lingering, acidic aftertaste her tongue was almost too numb to detect. Though the arach blood was not as poisonous as its venom, she'd need several days to regain full feeling in her mouth again. Best in future to keep a better hold on her blade, she thought when the spasms eased, else she'd find herself again with no defense from a hungry arach but her own teeth. Aili corrected herself then. She had neared her destination, her goal, her dearest prize. If she succeeded, she had already seen the end of arachs and bone-littered shafts.

Still, she had gained a story worthy of swapping with other Travelers, if any more survived, seeing one of the enormous, armored spiders retreating from her by the tawny glow of a lighting gem recessed into the tunnel ceiling. The light had brightened and dimmed, brightened and dimmed, feeding on her fading energies.

"That's right," she had said to the scuttling arach. "Don't want sick meat, do you? I must be

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Feature Artist
Geoff Taylor

Age: Born in 1946, now at my peak!
Residence: Cumbria, South Lakes
Marital Status: Married
Children: One of each, boy and girl that is, both grown up and working!!
Hobbies: photographing the roe deer around where I live, painting wolves, walking and exploring the countryside and observing the wildlife around here. Also do the gardening.
Favourite Book: "All the Pretty Horses" Cormac McCarthy
Started Painting In: Bookjacket work around 1976
Artist Most Inspired By: Blake, Palmer, Casper David Freidrichs, Gustave Moreau, Karoly Ferenczy, Eaun Uglow, Gustave Dore, Andrew Wyeth. There are too many and the list grows by the day.
Mediums You Work In: In the early days I worked in designer's gouache and later on about the mid eighties in acrylics.
Schools Attended: Eckington Westfield School in Sheffield,
OtherTraining: Graphics/Advertising course at Chesterfield College of Art.
Website URL: www.geofftaylor.btinternet.co.uk

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I'm sure I was always interested in pictures.When I was very young I must have been aware of narrative illustration; in one fairy tale book, I can remember one in particular that was so disturbing. I always had to try and avoid that particular part of the book. It had the quality of a recurring nightmare. When I was tiny, I apparently used to spend hours scribbling on everything that was at hand. My mum says if I couldn't ask for something as a toddler I would draw it for her! I'm still scribbling now, so that early programming is still the driver.

School was a long, hopeless experience; the only thing I enjoyed was art. I was good at cross country running, but just not the age for commitment. College...for some reason I decided on a graphics course, the natural progression from there was advertising. I seemed

to have more affinities with what they were doing in fine arts; it wasn't just the more creative and liberational agenda, it was the people involved and the tutors, everything about drawing, painting,sculpture etc. Advertising, learning about business practice, locked me into an aspirational spiral that faded. I had to go through a period in advertising before I realised I'd gone down a very blind alley. I became disillusioned with almost all aspects of planet "advertising." Sometime during this time of retreat, I took some of my less commercial stuff down to London and hawked it around the record companies. This proved to be totally unproductive, but it was a learning process. I established myself with an illustrators' agent. This did not bring in any album cover work, but there were enquiries from book publishers. Initially things were very slow, but eventually more work came my way.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I seemed to have fallen into 3 very different genre of art - the fantasy book cover art, the Games Workshop graphic images, and the Wildlife fine art painting.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Everywhere, life's experiences.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: In book cover commissions, Mythago Wood/Lavondyss by Robert Holdstock...I thought the books were just incredible..If any of the wonder and magic came through in the painting, I would be well pleased. Still waiting for the rest!

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: There is a misconception that digital is inevitable, so it has assumed Holy Grail status. For some strange reason people feel inadequate if they are not involved. I'm trying my hardest to feel adequate, so I'm resisting the Lemming rush! I'm sure wonderful things can be achieved with digital, but I don't think the individual craft ever comes through all of that software. I'm sure there has been less commissions as a direct result of digital. Maybe this has encouraged me to look to other things, ie. wildlife painting.

Is Xerox Right about Print On Demand?

By Jeff Wheeler

I've seen a commercial on CNBC a couple times now. Not a degrading beer commercial, I'm talking about one from Xerox about print on demand technology (POD if you please). In the commercial, a stodgy university professor is interrupted and contradicted by a student who claims that POD technology will help everyone in the world get published. At long last. The student's remarks are heralded by cheers from the classroom while the professor looks stunned and a little… worried.

The POD industry is an interesting one to research. As you may be aware, the founders of Deep Magic are planning to publish novels. And thanks to good 'ol POD technology (that Xerox invents), we will be able to do so. But there are cobwebs lurking in the corners of the marketing pitches you may not have heard about. I thought I would share a few with you.

Would I pay three times as much for a paperback novel from Deep Magic as I did for a Terry Brooks book? No way. And I wrote the story!

If you are a writer with a completed manuscript for a novel, it is very very very easy to publish it yourself. It's not by any means free, but it is not as costly as many of the vanity press schemes of the past. I just used the term 'vanity press' – what exactly does that mean? The name has some negative connotations, as it rightfully deserves. When you pay someone to publish your work for the pure pleasure of seeing a cover on your work (and perhaps to sell copies to immediate family members and friends you can guilt-trip into buying it), I call it a 'vanity press'. It means there isn't an editor there trying to help you make your work sellable. The author is the customer. They make money off you.

The difference is that with POD technology, it is much less expensive to produce books in this format than a traditional offset printing machine. With POD you can print a single book. With an offset printing, you print hundreds or thousands of books. The more you print (with offset) the lower the cost per book becomes. Some authors have been tempted by this, especially with the vanity presses. And they end up with 981 books in their garage that they can't sell. Traditional offset printing is cheaper than POD, but again, you must pay for an entire print run. With POD, the book is printed after a customer orders it. Just think – with POD you can park the lawn mower in your garage.

So, back to my original train of thought. You have a book manuscript. You want to publish it yourself because, frankly, you have not been able to land a deal with Del Rey yet. Heck, you can't even get an agent to look at it. And the Xerox commercial says that everyone can be published, right?

In the POD industry, there are many players. The biggest ones are iUniverse, 1st Books, and Infinity Publishing, but there are many more. With these companies, you pay a fee to accept your book and format it for their POD equipment. The initial investment is anywhere from $100 to $300. Considering that an offset print run for 2,000 books can be several thousand dollars, the investment is very attractive for authors.

I contacted all three of these companies, as well as a fourth company called Booksurge. Aside

from the set-up cost, I wanted to know if we (at Deep Magic) could understand the cost structure so we could determine a cover price for the first book we're planning to publish: *Landmoor*. That's when I started to feel the sticky cobwebs.

Cobweb#1 Most POD publishers set the cover price

If you go to the fantasy shelf at Barnes & Noble to grab the latest Terry Brooks paperback, you will pay $6.99 to $7.99 for it. Grab Robin Hobb and you'll pay the same. It doesn't matter how many pages in the novel, the price point is about the same. We wanted to publish *Landmoor* and offer the same retail price as the Big Publishing Houses. So I e-mailed representatives from all of these POD companies and gave them the page count specifications for *Landmoor* based on the size of the average paperback novel (most commonly referred to as the *mass market paperback* size). The least expensive price I was quoted was $16.99 (cover price). The most expensive was $20.95 (cover price).

I was aghast. Would I pay three times as much for a paperback novel from Deep Magic as I did for a Terry Brooks book? No way. And I wrote the story!

Here is how money flows in the publishing industry. Let's use JK Rowling's upcoming novel *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* as an example. I do not have any inside knowledge of their pricing structure, so this is just a guess based on rough industry averages and a little intuition (55% wholesale discount, 45% distributor discount).

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix
Cover price: $29.99 (Amazon is selling it for $17.99)
Distributor price: ~$16.50
Wholesale cost: ~$13.50
Printing cost: ~$5.00 (remember, they're printing *millions* of copies)

So who earns what? Amazon earns the difference between their selling price ($17.99) and the distributor price ($16.50). They earn $1.50 per book because they've sacrificed their margins to sell the book at a 40% discount. I'm sure they'll reduce the discount to increase their margins after the launch on June 21. Or perhaps they've negotiated a better discount with their distributor (Ingram) because they'll sell hundreds of thousands of copies.

Ingram (a major distributor) earns the difference between the Distributor price ($16.50) and the Wholesale cost ($13.50). They earn $3.00 per book for being the folks who take the books from Scholastic and make them available to all the bookstores.

Scholastic (the publisher) earns the difference between the Wholesale cost ($13.50) and the printing cost ($5.00). That's $8.50 per book – from that they have to pay for the marketing of the book, their editor & printing staff, shipping costs, and Rowling's royalties. Most authors earn about 10% royalties, but I'm sure she's negotiated a better rate. She's more wealthy than the Queen of England, after all.

How does this relate to POD?

Imagine if the cost of printing Rowling's book was $10.00 per book instead of $5.00. What would that do to the publisher's margins? It would drop it from $8.50 to $3.50 if they kept the cover price the same (and remember, they have to pay their staff, marketing, royalties, etc). Most POD companies account for this extra cost by increasing the cover price. That improves their margins.

But still, $20.95 for a paperback novel? That's insane! You can buy Rowling's book in hardcover for less than that. I argued with the reps from the major POD companies about pricing. What could they do to lower the cost? What could I do to lower the cost? Their pricing structure was based on the per-page cost of printing one POD book versus the economies of scale of printing thousands. If I wanted them to publish the book, they needed to set the cover price.

That is when I discovered Cobweb#2

Cobweb#2 Most POD publishers outsource their print jobs

Many of the top POD companies do not even own POD technology. What? How do they print the books? They do what most companies prefer to do – outsource it. And the company of choice, the #1 outsourcing company is called Lightning Source in Tennessee. Does this sound like a strange place to you? It might, but if you are in the publishing industry, it's the Holy Land. That's because the distributor Ingram has its headquarters there. Ingram – recognize the name from the example above? They are a book distributor. They are huge. Odds are, if you buy a book from Amazon.com, the order is sent electronically to Tennessee where they box it up at their warehouse and mail it to you directly. That saves Amazon the expense of shipping it to Washington State and then to you.

Ingram, it turns out, owns Lightning Source. To save shipping costs and warehousing costs, it makes tons of sense for companies to outsource to Lightning Source, especially POD books. Customers can order from Amazon, BN.com, Wal-Mart.com, and the books ship directly to the customer. You can also order a book from your local bookstore – they order books from Ingram anyway. Adding a copy of your book to the purchase saves some shipping costs as well since they do not have to order from an independent publisher. They even have POD technology in the United Kingdom so they can send the novel electronically there and print the books in England at no extra charge or cost. That saves our European fans extra shipping charges.

Sounds like Lightning Source is an ideal solution then, right? Why don't authors circumvent companies like iUniverse and go straight with Lightning Source?

Can any author work with Lightning Source? Here, the answer is no. They are not a publisher. In order to open an account with them, you must be a publisher. How does that happen? It's not really as magical and scary as you might think. We did it several years ago before creating Deep Magic. Our parent company, Amberlin, is a bona fide publishing company. We paid the fees to purchase a string of ISBN numbers. Basically, that's it. Oh, and have the technology that Jeremy Whitted referenced in his article last month.

So here is what makes companies like iUniverse so lucrative. How do POD companies that work with authors make money? They sell printed books directly to their authors much like vanity presses do. First of all, remember that they set the cover price of your book. They must do this to meet the cost that Lightning Source charges them to outsource (so they earn a margin on top of the cost to print the book). Let's say they pin your novel cover price at $19.95. They will then sell the book to the author at a 40% discount, or $11.97. How nice of them. The cost to print the book with Lightning Sources could be as low as $3.90 for printing, so the POD company earns a profit of $8.00 on books sold to its own authors. It makes financial sense for them to recruit as many new authors as possible, regardless of the quality of the novel. This is what makes them *feel* like a vanity press. They don't care if your book sells to the public. Odds are, at cover prices like these, it won't sell very well. The onus of marketing and selling the books falls squarely on the shoulders of the author.

If the POD company can lure into its network a thousand new authors each month, each of whom orders 25 copies of his or her book (for friends, relatives, and local reviewers, etc), then the

income is substantial. You can do the math yourself. They earn $8 per book, times a thousand authors per month, times 25 books sold to each author (if you don't have a calculator handy, that's $2.4 million per year). Remember that these POD companies have no investment in equipment, inventory, warehousing or fulfillment services, and that the whole enterprise, once set up, can do business almost entirely in cyberspace. Not a bad gimmick, if you ask me.

It boils down to the intent of the POD company. If the intent is to sell books to the author, then the higher the cover price, the better the deal for the POD company. In my opinion, it seems that this is the intent of most POD companies. The consumer (the reader) is not the primary customer.

If this is true, why would a POD company want a publisher to charge $7.99 for a paperback? But even if they wanted to, they can't. That's…Cobweb #3.

Cobweb#3 POD publishing cannot do Mass Market Paperbacks

There is a difference between a trade paperback and a mass market paperback – it's about two inches. Go to Amazon.com and you can look up the size of just about any book in their directory. Mass market paperbacks are about 4"x7". Trade paperbacks are larger, 6"x9" (sorry, I'm not going to convert this to centimeters). The trim size of a mass market paperback wastes a lot of paper on POD machines that are designed to print as large as 8-1/2" x 11". Sure, POD technology can handle the mass market paperback dimensions, but not profitably. If you shrink the dimensions of the book to 4"x7", you can fit fewer words per page. That increases the page count. That means a 275-page novel in Trade Paperback would be over 400 pages long in a mass market paperback version, unless you kept the font very, very small. That extra 125 pages is expensive.

During my research for this article, I e-mailed someone who worked in the logistics division of one of the biggest publishing companies in the world. I can't reference his name or the company he works for, but he explained to me that POD technology has a long way to go before it can compete economically with standard offset printing machines. The reason that a Terry Brooks paperback costs $7.99 is because they print tens of thousands of them at a time. POD machines print one at a time. They just don't do mass market paperback cost-efficiently. Don't expect it to for several more years. Xerox needs to find a way to lower the cost of the machine to make it a viable replacement technology for traditional offset printing.

This large publisher does use POD technology in their warehouses, though. On certain kinds of books (like text books and certain market niches) where trim sizes are larger, and with out-of-print books, it makes sense to use POD technology. Need a trade paperback (which is a larger size than a mass market paperback)? Use POD to print one at a time. It's still more expensive than offset printing but not prohibitively so.

So where does that leave us at Deep Magic?

We want to make our works available to you at the lowest realistic cost. Notice I didn't say 'possible' cost. The good news is that by working with Lightning Source directly (we *can* since Amberlin is a publishing company) we can cut out the middle man costs, the extra shipping costs, the warehousing costs, and the fulfillment costs. Costs that we will not have to pass along to our readers. All that without breaking a sweat. That allows us to focus on what we do best.

Providing high quality stories and artwork.

We have the technology to layout books like any other book on the shelf (well, any standard 6"x9" Trade Paperback on the shelf). We have a staff of really talented editors to help make sure the

novels you get are entertaining and well-written. We have ISBN numbers. And we should be able to do it at much less than the current market price of POD books (remember the range of cover prices I was quoted? $16.99 to $20.95). I shopped around on-line to find a comparable price point for POD technology in paperback (trade paperback, not mass market) in the fantasy genre. I found George R. R. Martin's works available in trade paperback for $14.95. I smiled, because I know we can probably beat that price. I also smiled because iUniverse and Booksurge won't be getting our business.

You will.

You see, we're not in the publishing business because we want to earn money off our authors. We've created Deep Magic as a way for you, our readers, to test the waters without a financial investment. Would you risk $14.95 on a novel from an author you'd never heard of? Probably not. But you've had the opportunity to read some of our novels for free as they are serialized in Deep Magic. Hopefully some of the names of our authors are becoming familiar to you. Hopefully you appreciate the quality of the writing and the artwork we provide.

Hopefully you'll want to purchase our books, and tell a few friends, when we start publishing them. You are the folks we want to please. Our authors want to keep writing new stories and creating new worlds for you.

I think Xerox is right in their commercial. Everyone will be published someday. But are you sure you want to read every book that every writer publishes? How will you know the book is worth reading? At what cost? That it meets your standards of professionalism and quality?

Hopefully because it will have *Amberlin Books* on it.

The End

Circle of the Great Owl
By Daniel L. Needles

As I lie here dying in a stranger's land, on a stranger's bed far from home, I think of you, my brother. Oh, how I miss you - your strong smile, your firm hand on my shoulder. My invincible older brother. Yet you died just a few days ago from the same hot fever that burns through me now like a wildfire in summer. Don't worry. I kept my promise. Though I think it would have been better for us if I had not. Fate has come full circle. A fate that, until now, I knew nothing about.

* * *

It started a month ago not far from our village, below a bluff where the Coos River greets the ocean. Knee-deep in the cold, numbing water, I used a stone to drive the last birch stick into the muddy river's bottom to complete the weir, a submerged fence of stakes and lattice, rock and mud. Soon the tide would rise and the fence would guide the fish into a shallow pool. They'd be trapped there until the waters receded. Then the harvest would begin.

"It's been a good year, Bright Eyes," I told myself.

My elder brother, Strong Heart, heard me and laughed.

I glanced at him.

He grinned his approval from the shore, fixing me with his strong gaze. This year I had turned thirteen and we worked side by side. I was a younger reflection of my brother. From our father our eyes were brown, set in distinguished features. From our mother our skin was clear and our hair coarse and black, tinged red by the summer's sun.

On its far side, its maker had cut a smooth triangle into its thick shell, creating a doorway the size of a man. A steel hut, I thought.

Five years my senior, my brother stood several inches taller than I, with broad shoulders and defined muscles. The wind swept his hair back, revealing the old scar beneath his left eye. I was envious of this most of all. I wanted to earn my own war marks.

"It'll be some time until the tide recedes," he said, giving me a hand as I stepped up onto the bank.

I rubbed my tingling legs, numbed by the icy water, and nodded. A seagull cried overhead as I sat down and slipped one foot tenderly into the matrix of woven grass within my bear-hide moccasin.

"I saw a cave up there." He used his lower lip, jutting it out, pointing up the hill. "It must have been uncovered when the ground shook yesterday."

Getting to my feet, I shook my head no.

He started up the hill anyway, ignoring me as he sometimes did. I followed obediently behind, bounding up the jumbles of rock and boulders that covered the otherwise barren slope. A few times I slipped, my legs growing numb again as gusts of wind raced across them. But before long I saw the mouth of the cave. Jagged incisors of rock growled as the cold wind swept through them.

Standing there in one place I began to shiver, goose bumps covering my body, my skin tinged

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A Tale Told By An Idiot
By Gary Allen

Gary Allen is the author of ***The Lath'roug Saga****. Book One, The Heather Thane, was released as a trade softcover in November 2002 by Equilibrium Books. In this article he talks about getting your work into print and the potential merits of Print-on-Demand publishing.*

An impregnable fortress, the gateways into which are watched by fierce and bad-tempered guardians…

A quest that has destroyed countless legions of hopeful contenders…

A magical prize that has eluded all but a handful of veterans…

You might be forgiven for thinking that I am describing the latest fantasy epic, but of course I am not. Instead, this is an article about the sometimes horrible, often soul-destroying, goal of getting your fantasy work into print.

So, you've written the next big fantasy saga. You've agonised over countless re-drafts, and you believe you have something that people will love. What next? How can you get your masterpiece out there?

This is an article about the sometimes horrible, often soul-destroying, goal of getting your fantasy work into print.

Chances are, like thousands of the rest of us "fledgling" writers, you will try sending your work to the big publishing houses. If you are lucky, about a year later you will receive a polite rejection note. You might also try to get the attention of a literary agent and receive a very similar, disinterested reaction. Next you might try some of the emergent or alternate publishers. Unfortunately, the literary marketplace has become so competitive and cutthroat, there's a real possibility that you will not raise much interest from even the smaller publishers or agents. The sad truth at the moment is, unless you're a *name*, you are going to struggle for a long time to attract the attention of the big players. If your work is particularly speculative, you might spend your whole life waiting for someone to take a chance on you. Quite simply, in a risk-gain analysis, most of us are never going to look like a wise investment. But there are hordes of enthusiastic fantasy readers who will eagerly adopt your creation – if you can get it out there.

There is nothing like a wall of rejection slips to test your determination, mettle, or delusion (choose which you feel applies to you). I know from personal experience just how demoralising it can be to wait months and months to get a form letter telling you that your work doesn't quite meet publisher/agent X's current needs. The message of this article? Don't despair, and certainly don't give up.

This is not an article about how to polish your work, or where to go for editorial advice. It's also not an article about manuscript formatting, synopsis writing, or the relative merits of agents. However, it is an article about how a fledgling writer can market themselves, and the possibilities offered by print-on-demand (POD) publishing.

The commentary here is based upon my experiences, which have culminated in the release of

The Heather Thane (available as a trade softcover/e-book from November 2002) and *Camaric* (available from April 2003).

Short Stories, E-zines and Building a Readership

One way to improve your marketability is to build your own readership. One of the best ways of doing this is getting you work widely read. Submit short stories and serialised work to e-zines, print magazines and other forums that publish speculative fiction. Be prepared to make your work widely and freely available. You might not be a household name, but you will build yourself a following.

There is a dizzying range of personal, amateur, semi-professional and professional publications that will be interested in your work. The trick is to find quality publications with a following, so you can, in turn, build your own readership. There are markets that pay for short fiction, and some quite well. However, be prepared to find and support fledgling operations. Ultimately, this will be rewarded.

There is a definite art to short story writing, involving a range of storytelling skills different from the ones we employ when writing a novel, or a series of novels. However, writing short stories can help you learn greater efficiency/brevity in your writing, provide you with much more immediate editorial feedback, enable you to connect with readers who might otherwise have never seen your work, and give you much needed feedback on how people react to your creations. There's nothing that helps sharpen your world-building skills more than having to give a reader a sense of a wider world and a complete story in just a couple of thousand words.

At the time of penning this article, I have been published around 30 times. The exercise has helped me refine my world, explore stories I might never have considered, and most importantly, reach a whole lot of people all over the world whom I might never have met. Now… ta dah… I have a publication record to list on my writing resume.

Get an Internet Presence

If you haven't got one, get an internet presence. It doesn't have to be the most "flashy" (pun intended) site on the web. What it does need is links to your work, a mechanism for people to join an update list, background information about your world(s) and work, and a newsroom.

My own site averages between 1,500 and 2,000 visits a month. There are plenty of websites which do better, but the point is these are people who are exposed to me and my work. They are also readers who may have stumbled on to one of my stories and now might visit one of the other publications where my work is appearing. I now have a nice statistic to throw in my writing resume.

Update List

Every time one of my short stories is released, I send a quick note to my update list. I've kept them informed of my efforts to get *The Lath'roug Saga* into print, and I generally let these readers know that I appreciate their support.

Having an update list enables you to get a sense of a "following" for your work. It also increases the chances that, if someone publishes your short fiction, there will be a pool of people who are likely to visit and comment on your story – which increases the odds that the publisher is going to want to see more of your work.

Of course, an update list is another positive to include on your writing resume. I don't have a huge update list, only about 200 people, but when I contact this group it isn't spam, because they have an established interest in my work. And that's gold dust in my opinion.

POD Publishing

Okay, time for a reality check. In spite of all of the above, you still might not be able to attract the interest of a publisher or agent. I still haven't. However, last year a writer friend of mine suggested that I consider POD and pointed me in the direction of an Australian publisher, Equilibrium Books. Here's a quick summary of what's involved in print-on-demand:

1. You are likely to be called upon to pay for some initial set up costs. This should not be a great deal of money – around US$150 - $250. After all, we're not talking about vanity publishing (where you actually pay all the printing costs and distribute the book yourself).

2. What you get for your money varies, but it should involve some editorial work, assistance with cover art, layout, registration for an ISBN, a sales facility, and some marketing.

3. Your work will be printed in runs to respond to orders. It should look professional. Unlike traditional publishing, your work will continue to be reprinted as long as there are orders. Every couple of years you may be called upon to pay some form of renewal to keep your print facility active.

4. You should receive a monthly royalty cheque. You're unlikely to receive an advance, but as set up costs and the risks to the publisher are less, you're likely to get more per book sale.

Here are some tips for anyone considering the POD path:

1. Look for an operation that appears reputable and professional. Rely upon referrals, look at their other titles, email their writers and read through their material. Talk to other writers, access resources and do your homework before even approaching a POD publisher to invite them to give you information.

2. Look for a publisher who isn't prepared to publish everything. Preferably you want a publisher with a commitment to quality, and with a special interest in your area.

3. Look for a publisher with established links to distribution networks (such as well established online or brick-and-mortar bookstores).

4. Expect to pay some set up costs, but not a great deal of money (see above). Check the contract in terms of royalties, etc.

5. Expect to do a lot of the marketing yourself. That means approaching your local bookstores, organising reviews, paying for advertising, and trying to attract the attention of your local media. To be honest, marketing your book is another article in itself.

6. Be prepared to "pump prime" – e.g. it might pay to invest in getting an artist to produce your book cover, rather than rely upon the publisher to produce one for you. It may also be worthwhile to buy your own copies to send to local newspapers and magazines to try and drum up some interest.

I was lucky in finding Equilibrium Books. Shop around and find a publisher that suits you.

POD isn't for everyone; it's not a quick road to fame or riches. However, I have found it extremely gratifying to see my work in print. If you're prepared to work at it, POD could be a way of helping you progress your writing career to the next level.

Put It About

Since the release of *The Heather Thane*, I have contacted fantasy clubs, student newspapers, community magazines, and even television shows, as part of my own marketing. I have also "cold contacted" a number of bookstores. To date, two stores in my home city and one in Sydney have copies of *The Heather Thane* on their shelves. I am also about to invest in some advertising on relevant web sites and in some print publications. I don't know how successful I am going to be – it may all come to naught, but if you don't have a go, you're guaranteed nothing will happen.

Shameless Plug

Intrigued by my story and experiences? Good… why not read *The Heather Thane* and let me know what you think. Visit Equilibrium Books for details. Of course, you can also visit my site for links to my published short fiction and to join my update list.

Good reading… good writing and good luck!

"There is tension that keeps a reader just on the edge of unease, and it's a delicious unease!" *Quantum Muse News, December 2002.*

On the rugged frontier, a bloody feud between two powerful noble families threatens to plunge the West into civil war, and in so doing bring to life an ancient wildblood prophecy of doom...

Artist Profile
Justin Phillips

Titles

Top Left: Mother
Bottom Left: Etherial Nectar
Bottom Right: Satanic Herd

Artist Website: http://www.serenityarts.co.uk

The Lost Unicorn
By Donald Sullivan

Brennan couldn't understand why he, a mere novice wizard, had been summoned by His Excellency, Sherwin, The High Wizard of The Royal Council. The gangly youth bowed and then stood nervously before The High Wizard. Sherwin was a slightly built man, but his craggy features and neatly trimmed red beard gave him an intimidating appearance.

Sherwin indicated a chair. "Please be seated, Brennan." Brennan did as he was told.

"First, I must apologize to you for the manner in which you were summoned here, but as you will learn, there was a need for secrecy. I have summoned you because I have an urgent and dangerous quest for you."

Brennan's jaw dropped, and he started to speak.

Sherwin held up his hand. "Yes, I know that you are a novice wizard, still in training. And yes, there are a number of powerful, experienced wizards on the council that I would not hesitate to send on a dangerous quest. But not this one. Your task, Brennan, will be to retrieve Prince Steven's pet unicorn."

In spite of your tender age, you are the most powerful novice to train for the council since I have been High Wizard.

Brennan's face showed his disappointment. Of course no council wizard would be sent on such a mundane quest. It was widely known that the young prince treasured his unicorn above all his other possessions, and that Sherwin himself had captured the unicorn (one of very few in existence) and given it to the prince. The prince and the unicorn almost immediately bonded. Still, looking for a lost unicorn did not seem like such an urgent and dangerous quest to Brennan.

"The prince lost his unicorn?"

"Not that simple. The young prince's pet was taken in a raid by the rebels who seek to overthrow the queen. I am not sure why the rebels risked such a raid to steal the unicorn, but my guess is that their aim was to humiliate the queen by showing that the rebels are capable of reaching inside the Royal Palace itself. Her Majesty does not want word of the raid to get out just yet; she wants us to make every effort to recapture the unicorn from them as swiftly as possible."

Brennan was shocked. "But how could they have possibly managed to get inside the palace? The Palace is..."

Sherwin interrupted him. "The small party of raiders used a secret passage, known only to a few of Queen Lira's closest advisors."

"A traitor...among Her Majesty's advisors?"

"There is that possibility, and for that reason there are only three people who know of this quest: The Queen and I--and now you. But I doubt that there is a traitor among us. Remember that the rebel leader, Mandrel, was the most powerful wizard on the Royal Council of Wizards before he was banished for practicing dark magic. While he was here, he probably learned of the secret passage. Not only that, but Mandrel knows all five of my wizards on the council. For that reason, I cannot send any of my wizards on this quest.

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TEARS OF MINYA

By Jeff Wheeler

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
Jay-Sharp, Tier of Lunis

Jaylin dropped down the wide sewer shaft, hitting the rounded tunnel at the bottom, and stumbled forward. Catching himself, he straightened, brushing the cinders off his pants and hair. The flavor of fire scorched the air and smoldering chips of wood and stone came like hail from the Sutton above. He started forward.

Two men blocked his way.

He spun the other direction. Lady Minya stood there with two more of her followers. All four were ordinary-looking men, favoring the open vests with flared shoulders he had seen throughout the Tier of Lunis. Were they students or simply in disguise?

"And I had heard all about how subtle you were, Lady Minya," Jaylin said. Rather than a queenly gown, she wore pants and a soft silverfox-rimmed mantle covering a jeweled vest and tunic. Her long blonde hair fell straight down her back. He met her gaze fully this time, looking deep into those intelligent gray eyes, and nearly choked. "The reports of your beauty, on the other hand, were not overrated."

"But you didn't come here to flatter me," Lady Minya said.

Before he could speak, the blaze of the building roared more loudly above them, snowing cinders and searing chunks of wood into the sewer tunnel.

"We'd better retreat farther down," she said. "When the Sutton collapses, it should take this passage with it."

"You did all this for me? I'm the one who is flattered." He followed her down the tunnel. At a junction, two more guards blocked the other exits. Behind him, the last two approached and then waited on each side of the tunnel shaft. He wondered how old they were. His age? It was difficult to tell. The heat came in thick billows, bringing stray pieces of soot flitting down the shaft like fireflies. When Jaylin reached a box-shaped room, Lady Minya stopped and faced him. The room smelled faintly of sewage, more strongly of smoke, and the torches the guards held gave off an oily scent. He almost chuckled at her kingdom. Jevin would be pleased if he knew she was forced to lurk in the sewers.

I could kill you here and now and Jevin would never know what became of you. I'm rather disappointed in this lapse of good judgment.

"You asked to speak to me, Warnock." She was older than her hirelings, as old as Thasos at least, but Jaylin didn't care about her age. He'd have kissed her were she as old as his mother. The unbidden thought surprised him and he shoved it away.

"What should I call you? I am aware of the honor you do me, Lady Minya. I hope I am welcome at your court." He motioned toward the sewer box.

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Procyx Book Two
The Works of Men

Chapter Three
The Old World

Reeber had not slept that night. While Melana was attractive, she had also presented herself as aloof and elite, and Reeber had little use for either inclination, particularly in a life mate. Besides, she seemed uncomfortable around him. A third strike. His sleepless turmoil that night had come from trying to reconcile the intense love he had felt for Melana in the vision Polyphemus had afforded him with the barely contained revulsion she apparently had for him. How could they possibly love one another? Reeber had struggled beneath a stomach souring with anger ever since, but he was not exactly sure against whom his anger fumed, Melana or Polyphemus.

Three days had passed since Reeber had arrived at Polyphemus. Three days and not so much as one call had come through to tell him what was going on. He felt forgotten, lost among the cracks of a world vast beyond understanding. But at the moment, none of that seemed very important. He sat on the terrace at four in the morning enjoying a delicious, well-earned meal. After a gratifying sip of Mael he reviewed the events of the previous days.

The first day after his arrival he had waited for them to come for him. It was a maddening time spent in the kind of gnawing anticipation that worsened a stomach already burning from irresolvable anger. Two and one half-hours had crept by in tortuous pacing. Frustrated, he had tried calling out, but the comm lines were down--*apparently*. What was going on? If Federation Command had sent a *Vanguard* to fetch him with such world-shaking urgency, why were they now leaving him to sit around and wonder what was going on? He marveled at the absurdity. By noon he had decided to wait it out on the terrace.

In all the times he had looked upon these ancient objects, he could never remember having seen anything quite like this before.

His house clutched at a solitary outcropping of rock protruding from a placid stretch of water that was isolated, somehow, from the immense, roaring falls of Polyphemus' endless oceans. A landing pad was etched out of stone next to the house. Moss infested most of the rocks. A few trees punctuated the grounds and an impressive vegetable garden flourished near the shore. Beyond this, no signs of habitation were to be seen anywhere nearby.

Reeber had felt suddenly, terribly, alone. He had imagined himself a banished prisoner, dropped off and forgotten with no visible means of escape. He *would* spend the rest of his life here, a forgotten castaway banished for daring to hear what only Mestrates should hear--whatever *that* was. He had fallen quickly past depression into despair.

"Think of something else . . ." he had rallied himself " . . . anything else! Look up, you idiot. See the sights. You don't know how long you will have this opportunity."

The day sky had worn royal blue, hued ever so slightly with hints of gray. Remote cloud

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Found Things
By M. Thomas

Author's Note: My heartfelt thanks to two special readers. Mark Reeder, without whose eloquent praise I might not have kept some of my best passages. And especially to the selfless devotion of my good friend, Steven McCrary, without whom it might not have all fit together.

This is for Steven, my first reader.

Prologue

"I believe that two things control life.

The first of these is coincidence–a random event that becomes a necessary detail. The second thing is incidents. And an incident, if you view it properly, is really just a coincidence, only more bloody.

Sixteen years ago there was an incident on the road to Manking. It involved, as far as I have been able to gather, a dog, two tinkers traveling to the city, a run-away wagon, and a small gaseous bundle that–for want of a better word–was called a baby."

- The Journal of Esmariah Gasp

She was of the sort quite proud to say at the end of their life they have had nothing to do with men or the nonsense such acquaintances lead to.

* * *

The General and his men assessed the scene just outside the walls of Manking. "Bloody mess," he said.

The two right-side wheels of the wagon were still turning under their own momentum, sounding out a wounded *cree-creak, cree-creak.* The horse had escaped the carnage and was watching them from the side of the road. The people involved were mostly stuck under the wagon, except for various parts of them that weren't. The carter was nursing a head-wound by the side of the road.

"Came out of nowhere," he kept saying. "Wandering along the side of the road, damn fools."

"Only tinkers," a Private said. "None of our peasants." The other soldiers sighed with relief.

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mad from disease to try biting an arach." Of course, the arach surely hadn't been thinking all this, but its instincts must have told it there was something wrong with the human for her to bite it when it had cornered her below the shaft. There was plenty of "sick meat" in the Dome, twisted by tainted magic. Any creature had to be wary, even if it was the spawn of tainted magic itself.

Laughing, Aili rolled over into her back, so delighted at the absurdity of her rescue that tears welled up and trickled from the corners of her eyes. She looked into the "sky" above, dull and black and starless, but the only sky the Dome had. Indeed the Dome was so vast, so many leagues across and connected by tunnels to so many other Domes, that she could forget it was man-made, magic-made, unchanging night.

Aili turned her head to look around.

"Wizardwork!" she swore and twisted up onto her knees.

She had emerged beside a stand of ghostwood. Luminescent white cedar, ancient and gnarled, grasped at the night. Some said they were the skeletal hands of dead gods. Others said they marked the graves of Progenitors. Aili knew for certain that in a land without sunlight, luminescence was a warning. She had seen more than one naïve Traveler crushed in those white "hands."

Aili drew one foot up under her, her movement slow, cautious. The trees creaked and swayed as she gained a careful footing, ever mindful that within the Dome there were no breezes. Listening, watching, she dared not breathe. The snapping of smaller branches warned her. Aili lurched away as the nearest tree grasped at her, and she tumbled down the slope below the hatch. She landed on a gravel path, scuffed and winded but relieved. One challenge after another, she thought again, and rested there where she sprawled until the temptation to cry herself to sleep became too great.

Standing and dusting herself off, Aili gazed down the path. Rolling hills of colored maple unfurled before her. She limped along the trail amidst them knowing that in the old times, before the Domes, these delicate trees might have been crimson or teal or shiny copper. Under the Dome sky they were bronze and black. Their leaves shivered with a sound like silver scales rattling on a battle shield or a snake's tail. About their trunks lapped knee-high scarlet bloodgrass, named for the bloodlust it generated in those who walked too long through it. Aili kept to the center of the path.

The trail had probably been warded for the protection of Travelers. *Probably*. Aili kept walking, kept staring ahead, toward the comfort of the light in the distance. It was a glittering star in the darkness, the light of a city-dome. It gleamed in the lighthouse atop the broad cupola, marking the location of the Barrier settlement and providing illumination within its confines. How much the Dome must have resembled an enormous black crystal ball half buried in the earth, black bubbles of cities inside, to anyone beyond. That was, assuming anyone still lived out there. But how much could have been left after the wars?

The path ended in the shadow of the city-dome, in an archway of barred black doors hinged and bound in gold. Aili pounded and waited for a response. She tapped her fingers against the purse knotted to her girdle. The crinkle of the forged travel papers within reminded her how important her demeanor would be. Wiping her hands on her canvas pants, she straightened. She glanced at the thin streaks of blood staining her tunic where a sharp pincer mouth had nipped or a razor-sharp arach leg had slashed her. Not much hope of looking presentable.

The Barrier who opened the door looked on Aili with more disgust than she'd seen them show for the food-begging nomads they often turned from the entry. The sight of the gray-haired woman's braids piled atop her head in a precise coil made Aili reach up and smooth her own loose, tattered plaits. Glaring, the gaunt woman eyed her head-to-toe, pausing at the Barrier tattoos on the backs of Aili's smudged hands. The swirling mage marks on the guard's bony hands looked freshly re-inked.

Without a word, the Barrier admitted Aili, barred the door, and led her the few steps to the

guardhouse. Its construction of black marble shot with red veins betrayed the former opulence of the Progenitor cities. Its crumbling corners betrayed their demise. There the guard stared at Aili pointedly, then said, "Where are your packs?"

Aili shrugged. Too long outside the city-domes, in the tunnels, she squinted as she tried to meet the guard's eyes. "Nomads ambushed me on the trail," she lied. "I had to throw down my packs to distract them." In truth, she'd lost the packs to an arach in the tunnels, but those passages were a Traveler secret. Better to let the Barrier think her a poor excuse for a Traveler, meant to collect scattered, forbidden magical artifacts from the nomads and from Progenitor ruins.

"Travel papers," the guard said, holding out her long-fingered hand, almost swallowed by the voluminous sleeve of her plain woolen robe.

Aili pulled the wrinkled parchment from her purse, cogs in her mind spinning fast. Before the Barrier could unfold the parchment, Aili fished her necklace from her tunic. "And I have this." She held up the end of the chain. The bronze ring dangled there.

"You're not allowed to have that," the guard said. Her thin lips pressed into a stern, flat line. "It's forbidden magic, even to Travelers."

"Don't I know that?"

Aili knew too well the power of Progenitor keys, an essential in every Traveler's contraband kit. So much of her wanderings as a Traveler had led her to places where powers far beyond her own were the only passage keys. Ancient receptacles of the old power, like this ring, were the only pass-safes left in the Dome, to the pitiful descendant of the Progenitors. There were few artifacts like this left. Sacrificing this one, even with its power drained, even to pass her through a guardhouse with a Barrier too distracted to study her travel papers, made Aili grit her teeth. But she wasn't going to need it anymore, was she? She wasn't going back out there. Handing over the ring was a commitment to a course of action, one she didn't want to dwell on.

She pulled the chain over her head, held the ring out in her palm. When the guard reached for it, Aili closed her hand. "Give me an escort to the vaults, and I'll sign it in myself."

Aili got her way, perhaps just so the gate guard could be done with her. Two tight-lipped Barriers led her through the city streets. The hems of their robes swished against the cobblestone and stirred up musty, sour dust. Haphazard spires and towers and courtyards of metal and marble and stained concrete closed in on them. Many buildings leaned half-collapsed, half-cannibalized against others. Light from gems inside dwellings darted and sliced from recessed doorways and cracked shutters, vying with the flat light of the constant lighthouse sun to throw strange, shifting shadows across their path.

Then they passed out of the tight rings of Barrier quarters and libraries into the neat, geometric fields that surrounded the high tower in the city-dome center. The crops were small, grayish, sparse. Livestock pens with sheep and goats and chickens huddled on odd remnants of land, in shadow.

"The farms don't look to be doing well," Aili said off-hand.

"Do they need to do well?" one Barrier answered, the one with hair as black as his skin was white.

"We aren't many," the woman with body and coloring like a pear, slightly greenish, said. "Who would we feed? The nomads?"

The pale man snickered. "We have a hard enough time with the way they breed. It doesn't matter how many of their children starve to death or fall in the twistwoods. They make more."

Aili didn't look at either of them. She'd seen derision before. "They make more of us. If law forbids us from breeding and passing on the taint of magic, someone has to produce more Barriers to protect the legacy of the Progenitors and their city-domes. To protect the nomads from what they

think they want."

"But if there were no more nomads, there would be no need for Barriers," the pear-skinned one said. "No one to use the magic."

Aili couldn't argue with Barrier logic. Annihilation of humanity inside the Dome, as outside, made perfect sense to them. She suspected that only paranoia of nomad fertility and resilience, the fear that Barriers would die out but nomads would go on, prevented wholesale genocide. They would have called Travelers heretics for believing anything else. They would have accused the Barrier sub-sect of becoming corrupted by the lure of the magical items the Travelers hunted down, and they would have been right. Indeed, some Barriers had already made that connection . . .

When the three Barriers came to the foot of the high tower, a sleek black stalk supporting the magical false sun in the lighthouse, they veered past the lift cage. The ring Aili bore might have been forbidden, but it was not so important that they'd want to seal it inside one of the upper vaults, above the tower floors served by the stairs. The guards left her once she had given up the ring, with another twinge of reluctance. She tried to take her time recovering from her journey. She didn't want to seem as agitated, anxious as she truly was as she cleaned herself up, bandaged her hurts, ate some stale bread and shriveled vegetables in the deserted Traveler guest chambers.

Only then did Aili take a deep breath and mount the tower stairs. When no one watched, she disappeared. She was still there all right, still climbing the steps. This was one of her small magics. To blend herself away until no detail interesting enough to catch anyone's attention remained. Most Travelers who survived long in the tunnels owed it to this power, though the instincts of nightmare creatures like arachs were harder to fool than the diffused attention of humans. Barriers with the opposite power might chance to see her, if she were out in the open or careless, but she wasn't and she wouldn't be.

Thus did Aili slip in and out of the lower three vaults, one after the other. She padded with care past vaultkeepers milling about the vault doors, entering new artifacts in their ledgers. She reined in her energies tightly enough that the lighting gems didn't react to her presence until she was far back in the maze of vault shelves.

Aili chewed her lip and reminded herself that she was not in the vaults to pocket magical baubles. Though she fingered polished wands, oil vials, and numerous charged rings and amulets that could have served her as pass-safes, she took none of them. She was after something bigger, in every sense of the word. In truth, there was little chance of finding the chalice in the lower vaults. She just needed to be thorough. This was her last chance, and she didn't know what natural misdirection abilities the artifact might have had. If her suspicions were correct, and the zealot Sarrin and her fanatics were on their way here, Aili would not have time to come back and look again.

Disappointed but not surprised at having found nothing in the third vault, Aili sneaked up behind the vaultkeeper. She danced this way a little, that way a bit, as the keeper moved items from one table to another just as she tried to pass. With a silent sigh of relief, Aili skirted around the frame of the vault door to the stairs. In her eagerness she took two steps at once, propelling herself into the path of a Barrier who descended the murky black steps, head down and arms laden with books. The collision ripped Aili's illusion away like a threadbare curtain and left both women planted on their backsides.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I should have been watching where I was going," Aili said without looking up at the Barrier she'd hit. She hoped that rushing to take the responsibility herself would distract the woman from wondering why she hadn't seen Aili. The vaultkeeper's doughy face, below his thinning tuft of yellow hair, appeared at the door and peered at them quizzically. Aili put on a sheepish grin that perked the man's brow but seemed to satisfy curiosity.

"Here, let me help you gather your books," Aili said, turning back to the fallen Barrier with an armload of them. "Here . . . Kynan?"

The other Barrier, round and sullen, glanced up at the mention of her name. Her dark eyes, black as her hair, shot wide. "Aili?"

"Kynan, what are you doing here?" she whispered.

"Where would I be but Skygrave?"

"Sky-?" Aili stopped herself and urged Kynan up half a flight of steps to a balcony. She stared out over the city-dome interior, feeling her old friend brush against her elbow. "This is Skygrave? I'm . . . home?"

"You don't know where you are?" Concern filled Kynan's eyes, reminding Aili what a worrier she had been.

"Well . . . I wasn't so much looking for a place by name. I just knew this was the last city-dome on the spur of the tunn- . . . the last on the path."

Kynan's thick, rosy lips frowned. "I don't understand. I didn't understand then, either. Aili, why did you run away?"

Aili studied the city again, trying to find something familiar about its shape. She'd seen so many over the last few . . . months? Had it been years?

"I wish I could explain everything to you, Kynan. I wish you could understand what it is to need to know, about the Domes, the Progenitors, the legends, the old world. The Barrier tutors tell us how powerful the Progenitors' magic was, that they could create false suns and seal themselves and their servants inside the Domes when wars ravaged the world. There are many Domes, you know, not just this one with these few city-domes. No one told us that. They warn us about the corruption of power and how it drove the Progenitors to civil war. But they don't explain what this magic is inside our veins or why it became so stagnant and polluted that it spawned the taintwoods and the *things* that live there. They don't tell us there are legends about doorways for *leaving* the Domes."

Kynan stared at Aili. Blinking, she said nothing, and the odd, tense hope rising in Aili's chest sank. Her friend still didn't comprehend the Traveler wanderlust.

"I didn't tell you I was leaving because you would have talked me out of it. You were always the levelheaded one of us. I didn't want to be talked out of Traveling, though. Hearing Chief Steward Lerre deny me my request to become a Traveler was enough. I didn't want to hear it from anyone else. So I forged travel papers . . ."

"But now you've come back."

Aili nodded, not understanding the significance of why her path had led her back here. Exhausted, worn thin to the point of distraction, she rubbed her bleary eyes. She looked out over Skygrave again, waiting for her vision to clear. In that one blurry moment, the light gleaming off the angles of metal towers and marble spires looked like the drawings she had seen of stars. She laughed, soft and breathy.

"Do you remember our first day here?" Aili's gaze still roamed the city as she spoke. "Both just children." She touched the back of her hand, rubbing a long-faded ache. "I remember we were still bandaged from the tattoos."

"Uh-huh."

"You were still crying."

"Because they'd held me down."

"I was still crying for my family, saying they were going to come back and get me. Truly, I knew they weren't coming back. They traded me to the Barriers for food. I watched them negotiate over me. I don't think I ever admitted that to anyone. Their memory of me probably didn't last

much past their full bellies."

"Our teachers wouldn't have told us if our nomad families ever had come back."

Aili cleared her throat of one small kernel of old emotion. "I know. Didn't stop us from crying, did it? Do you remember Chief Steward Lerre trying to distract us? Telling us if we stared at the city-dome ceiling long enough we might see the stars hidden there?"

"I remember."

Aili nodded through sudden tears at the gleaming city. "I found our stars." Kynan did not respond. "I wish you understood," Aili whispered again.

"You never asked me."

"What?"

Something bumped Aili's elbow, and she looked at Kynan. The sullen-eyed girl—a sullen woman now—shifted the books in her arm and tossed back the heavy wooden cover of the top one. Aili saw the upside down details of ornate, cryptic pass-safes sketched in her friend's meticulous hand. Kynan flipped several pages, one-by-one, slowly. Drawings and notes on city-dome specifications, false suns and complex wards cluttered every yellowing parchment page.

"Kynan, where did you get all this information? I've never known the vaultkeepers to allow such detailed study."

"I'm not a novice anymore."

"And not as lacking in wonder as I had assumed." Aili was embarrassed now by the assumption. She was embarrassed by the youthful conviction that had led her to believe that she knew her place better than Lerre had, that she alone could discover all the secrets of the Dome and the true will of the Progenitors. That she could enlighten her fellow Barriers with her grand discoveries and lead them back out into a world they might reclaim as their own. Still, she did not regret the bravery and urgency her naivete had lent her. These had led her far and away, and back again.

Kynan shrugged and closed the book. "You never asked me what I wondered. Just because I wasn't in a rush to leave Skygrave . . ." There was dull pain in her voice, resentment.

"I'm sorry, Kynan." And she was. Aili watched her friend put the pile of books on the balcony floor and lean on the balustrade with her. The realization of how lonely Skygrave must have been for Kynan made Aili's cheek burn with shame. "Have you ever heard anyone speak of the chalices?" Aili asked, offering her dearest secret as an apology.

"Chalices?" Kynan's gaze shifted toward hers with caution. "The greatest of all artifacts? The receptacles for the very sources of each Progenitor's power after death? Of course." Kynan finished with a snap to her voice.

"I'm sorry," Aili said again. "I didn't meant to suggest you-"

"There would have been two dozen of them, but the stories say they've been destroyed by zealot Barriers or depleted in attempts to purge the taint from the Dome and that only about seven of them remain."

"One," Aili said, not really pausing to ask herself how Kynan would have known *that* much about a taboo subject. "Only one remains." Kynan regarded her with silent, obvious curiosity now. "The chalices have always been the dearest goal for any Traveler. I learned as much from some of the greatest Travelers, those who took me under their wings along my paths. You heard me say there are many Domes besides this one? There are two dozen, one for each Progenitor, and each the home of a chalice."

Kynan gasped. "You've found them?"

Aili shook her head. "We—Travelers—figured this out too late. We've spent the last few

months always one step behind a group of Barrier zealots using a hidden network of tunnels to travel from one Dome to the next . . . destroying the chalices as they find them. Their leader, Sarrin, has even convinced chief stewards to pump whole vaults full of concrete and entomb artifacts. They've destroyed libraries in Blackwater and Ashfield." Aili leaned nearer to Kynan, whispering. "In Evercloud, the zealots convinced the Barriers to *pull down* the high tower. The Evercloud sun fell to the city floor and shattered into a burning heap. Many were killed. Many killed themselves, as a way of purging their own taint from the Dome. Sarrin blessed them as they died."

"Evercloud?" Kynan said. She clenched her fists against the balustrade. "Evercloud is only a few days from here."

Aili nodded. "So is Sarrin. She's been a few steps behind me since I escaped Clayburn, when they seized all the Travelers they could find in the city as heretics. She's probably almost here."

"Why here?"

"This is the last city I have yet to search in this Dome. The last chalice—if it still exists at all—is in Skygrave."

Kynan, engrossed one moment by Aili's every word, pressed her lips together and turned her face back toward the city below them. Aili did not see the surprise she had been expecting in her friend's expression.

"What aren't you telling me, Kynan?"

The ring of footfalls behind them dispersed the aura of quiet confidences. Aili glanced over her shoulder at the Barrier who stepped out onto the balcony. She bit the inside of her cheeks, irritated at the interruption.

The Barrier gave a respectful nod, her heavy red braids teetering above a young, delicate face. "Chief Steward Kynan, we have a large contingent of non-resident Barriers at the southern gate."

"Chief Steward Kynan?" Aili said under her breath, feeling a sense of her own arrogant foolishness wash across her face again. Kynan glanced sidelong at her, then away. Had Aili betrayed herself to the wrong person?

"They follow a Barrier who gives her name as Sarrin," the girl continued. "She requests entrance for her people and audience with you."

Aili grabbed Kynan's arm. "*Sarrin*."

Kynan shifted her gaze from Aili to the messenger. She lifted her chin and assumed a stately air Aili would not have expected of her. Her voice was level and sure when she spoke. "Tell this Sarrin you have summoned me down from the top of the high tower and apologize for the delay. Have water and bread provided for them outside while they wait. Then bar the doors and have my personal attendants begin charging the fortification wards on all the gates. Be swift, Bura."

Without question, the messenger nodded and disappeared back into the tower. Kynan's gaze shifted by degrees back to Aili, tentative.

Aili nodded, her head low. "Decisive. You wear your title well. How long?"

"Lerre has been dead two years now."

"Two years . . . ? *Two years?* How long have I been gone?"

"More than five."

Aili's abrupt laughter astonished even her. "Five. That's a wonder. It seems like months, and it seems like forever."

Kynan squeezed Aili's shoulders. "Just as this is your home yet seems like a strange place you've never seen before."

Swallowing hard, Aili laughed again, choking, tears surging hard beneath the surface of her veneer. "And finding now that a chalice might be here. I lived here so long, and everyday I looked at

the lighthouse sun and the gates and the maze of crumbling buildings and dreamed of all the exciting finds I would make as a Traveler. I was going to understand so much, see so much, change things. The thought that a chalice might have been here all along makes . . .” Made her want to weep with the overwhelming sense of wasted time. It was too much for her to dwell upon, with danger at the gates of . . . her home. Aili sniffed back her tears. “Well, Chief Steward Kynan, you seem to have a plan in mind. I’m at your disposal.”

“And I at yours,” Kynan said and motioned for Aili to follow her.

Down the stairs and out of the high tower they walked together, Aili with her long strides, Kynan with her short, sure legs pumping beneath her robes. Deep within the maze of dwellings once more, Kynan leaned close.

“So, *Traveler*,” she said, peering sidelong at Aili as they navigated deserted alleyways. “Tell me what you’ve heard of the theory that the chalices were not what they might seem.”

“You mean misdirection magic?”

“Misdirection, yes. Magic, no. I mean, have you encountered the idea that the chalices were not things but places?”

Aili’s step faltered. “Places? No. You mean . . .”

“Chambers. Founts of power where one could recharge artifacts, even people.”

“You know of such a place? A place in Skygrave?”

Kynan, not answering, motioned for Aili to turn from the alley through a narrow, unremarkable passage. Down a short, dark hallway, she followed Kynan to a modest apartment dwelling. Light from several gems set into the wall of a fireplace gave the illusion of a dying hearth. The glow of embers cast a burnt orange light across a makeshift kitchen, a scarred wooden table and benches, two cots made inviting by neat, tucked blankets. Beside the hearth, sewing, sat an ancient-looking Barrier woman with hardly hair enough to braid in the traditional style. She smiled up at Kynan but said nothing, as though she knew the Chief Steward was there for something other than her conversation. She nodded toward the rug before the hearth, where a child of five or six sat playing with old coins.

When Kynan said nothing, only stood just inside the door with her, Aili looked down at the little boy. She had begun to wonder why Kynan had brought her here, why no one spoke, when she noted something odd about the child. Yes, that was it. The child’s hands.

“Kynan, he has no mage marks. Why?” Aili trailed off when the tow-headed boy smiled up at her. Though he was thin and dressed in smudged, patched clothing, his cheeks were round, his smile bright. Aili could not remember ever seeing a child so healthy, so *happy*.

“Hello,” he said, and Aili felt something inside her jump as he addressed her.

“Hello,” she answered with hesitation. Then to Kynan she said, “Is he a nomad boy? What’s he doing here?”

The boy went back to playing with his coins in the warmth of the false hearth, humming.

“He’s no nomad,” Kynan told her. “And he’s no Barrier, though his parents were, both of them.”

“His parents? They broke the law and conceived a child?”

Kynan nodded. “Travelers. You know how they are for breaking rules.”

Aili blinked, not expecting barbed wit from the girl who had been her childhood shadow. “And you’re hiding him here?”

“Taking care of him for his parents. His mother has been gone, no few weeks now, looking for his father when he failed to return from an assignment.”

Aili and Kynan knew very well what that meant, that the boy’s parents were dead.

Kynan patted Aili's shoulder and nodded toward the boy. "Talk to him, Aili," she said, then stepped over the child's scattered coins and sat beside the old Barrier woman, watching.

Shaking her head, confused, Aili crouched on the rug and studied the boy as he arranged and rearranged his tarnished metal disks.

"*When I close my eyes*," he sang in a clear, high voice.

"*I can see spring.*

I see the beginning of all things."

He left off singing and hummed again.

"Little one," Aili said.

"Mish." He looked up and smiled again. Aili did not know why looking the child in the face made her nervous, filled her with excitement and dread, but it did. "My name is Mish. Look at my coins." He picked up three or four in his soft, small hand and set them in Aili's palm. He pointed at them. "That one's got a crane on it. They're white *when they live out there*." His finger pointed above the hearth, but Aili knew what he meant; she wondered if he did. "That one is a birch tree, and that one's got plums on it."

"Ah, I see," Aili said. "I don't think I would have recognized them. Thank you for telling me."

Mish took the coins back from her, one at a time, and continued his serious business of rearrangement. He leaned over the coins, peering at them.

Aili cocked her head. "Mish, look at me." He did. "Why do you squint, Mish?"

The boy shrugged. "Darker here."

"Darker here than where?"

"Than in my dreams."

"What do you dream about?"

Without looking up from his coins, Mish pointed above the hearth again. *Out there.*

Aili scratched her brow, an absent-minded gesture of thought. "Mish, where were you born?"

The child didn't hesitate in his answer. "In the chamber of the chalice."

"In the . . . chamber of the . . ." Aili looked up at Kynan and the old nursemaid. The Chief Steward raised her brows and nodded. "He just says it, pretty as you please," Aili said, marveling.

"But . . ." Kynan gave a heavy sigh. "He can't tell you where that is, and neither can his parents. It's underground, apparently, in tunnels laced with nightmare creatures. Part of a Progenitor ruin they stumbled upon. They conceived our little Mish there and lived off what they caught in the tunnels while they catalogued everything they found. Too much to haul up, they said. They stayed there the better part of a year, they thought, before returning to Skygrave and relating their tale to Lerre, then to me. When they tried to find it again, they couldn't. That's where Mish's father went his last time out, another attempt to find the chamber."

"They didn't draw any maps? Leave any marks along their path?" Aili fisted her hands in her hair in frustration. Sarrin was at the gates, for gods' sake. Time was precious.

Kynan shook her head and, as an afterthought, reached over and shook the elderly Barrier awake as the woman started snoring. "They lost much of their gear fighting their way back out of the tunnels. Their main concern was getting Mish out safely."

Aili was trying to think when a suckling noise distracted her. Mish popped one reddish finger from his mouth. He smiled and kept chewing, his lips wet and pink.

"What are you eating?" Aili hadn't seen any food in his hand a moment before, and he hadn't gotten up from the floor. "Kynan, what is he eating?"

"Berries."

"Berries?"

"Show Aili your hand, Mish." He held up a juice-streaked hand with three plump purple berries in his palm. "He, well, *makes* them. He wants them, he opens his hand, and there they are."

"He . . . That's no small magic, Kynan. I mean, it is, but to conjure something *organic* is unheard of."

"Yes, it is, for someone who doesn't come from the place he comes from. Who knows what effect being born in such a place had on him."

Mish lifted his hand toward Aili. She sniffed in the heavy, sweet scent of the berries. He lifted his hand higher, urging her to take one. Tentative, she reached toward them.

Urgent steps pounded down the outer hallway. The door into the apartment swung open. Bura, panting and pink-cheeked, hurried inside and bowed. "Chief Steward Kynan, the strangers are within the city."

Kynan shot to her feet. "How did that happen?"

"Their leader became suspicious and talked several of the guards into opening one of the gates. She's convinced some of the more extreme residents that you're harboring a fugitive Traveler from Clayburn, someone carrying magical contraband." The young woman's gaze wandered toward Aili, then back to Kynan.

"Come on, Mish," Kynan said, holding her hands out for the boy. She hauled him up into her arms. "We'll need to get you somewhere safer before I try to handle this zealot." She turned to Bura. "Gather up those of a less extreme view and set up barricades along as many of the streets leading to the high tower as you can. Force the strangers back out if you're able, along with whoever helped them."

"Where do we take him?" Aili asked.

"To the high tower." Kynan started out of the room with him.

"No!" Mish said, yelping. He held his hands out to the wooden table. "Coins!"

Aili grabbed a worn leather pouch from the table. It jiggled with the sound of metal on metal as she handed it to the frantic child. Smiling again, he stuffed the handful of coins he had been playing with into the bag.

Back out on the lanes, Aili glared in the direction of angry shouting, past distant buildings. The women hurried with the child toward the high tower. They were in the fields when a resounding boom preceded a spray of metal debris back in the rings. As they watched, a plume of dust drifted across the rooftops.

Kynan frowned, her brow creased. "The barricades aren't holding. More of our residents must have crossed over to stand with the zealots than I thought."

"Has Skygrave become so extreme?" Aili said. "So self-loathing?"

"The whole Dome is infected with this unreasonable paranoia. First it was a call for greater regulation of artifacts among resident Barriers, then restrictions on Traveler exemptions, and now this preference for death before magic." Kynan shook her head. "The Progenitors didn't rescue us from anything. We brought our nature with us."

Aili urged Kynan and the old woman back on their way. She took Mish from the Chief Steward's arms so Kynan could keep up. He clung to Aili, still smiling. She gritted her teeth through the pain in her shoulders.

"No, to the lift cage," Kynan said when Aili started inside with the boy.

Aili looked up, toward the slender tower stalk, the claw-like cradle for the sun atop it. "To the upper vaults? Can you trust the people you have up there?"

"I hand-picked them all myself. Not a zealot among them."

Kynan helped the elder Barrier along as they rushed to the metal lift cage. It was cramped

inside with three adults, but Kynan heaved the gate closed. With a click of metal against metal, she shut them in, just as the redheaded Barrier sprinted across the now dusty fields toward them. More Barriers followed, all fleeing.

Bura slid to a stop at the cage, colliding with it. She grunted with the bar-rattling impact.

"The barricades are down, Chief Steward," she said, gasping for breath. "Too many traitors among our own, and this Sarrin is powerful."

"All right, you did what you could," Kynan said. "Climb up on the cage and hold to the chain." Others ran to surround the cage, all muttering, frantic. "All of you, climb up!" She reached through the cage bars and tugged on a gold braided rope that hung from the upper levels. Her gaze met Aili's, and they exchanged a glance of agreement. Everything Aili had feared and warned Kynan of raged around them now. What surprised Aili was Kynan's even response, her self-assured determination. Her stoic friend had been a good choice for Chief Steward.

"Is the lift made to stand this?" Aili asked as people scampered up the outside of the cage. The metal groaned as the lift left the ground with a sudden jerk. More Barriers jumped to catch it. The box swayed, metal still moaning in complaint. She grabbed onto the bars on each side of her, trying not to fall against Kynan and the cage door or the elderly Barrier moaning in fear next to her.

Mish laughed. He had curled his legs around Aili's waist and held tight to her neck. She looked into his eyes and, again, that smiling face. Her heartbeat and panting breath slowed. She felt as though nothing could go wrong so long as this child laughed.

"You're not escaping us!"

The voice yelling from below was familiar to Aili, familiar enough to stir hatred and dread in the hollow of her stomach. She shifted to look around Mish's head. Sarrin and her followers gathered at the foot of the high tower. The zealot's skeletal-thin build and platinum hair, only a shade or two darker than her white robe, were distinct even from a distance. *White robes*, Aili thought. She would always remember Sarrin's people for their white robes. The most dangerous threats in the Domes were always luminescent.

As the lift climbed on, still bouncing, creaking, uncertain, Sarrin's gaze focused on Aili. The zealot's fists closed. Aili was sure she could see the woman clenching her jaw. Then Sarrin thrust one hand upward, and a wave of force like the swat of a god's hand batted the cage. Shrieking, one Barrier fell from the chain. Aili wanted to cover Mish's eyes, but she was too busy holding herself up. In horrified fascination, she watched his face as his gaze followed the man's fall. Mish smiled, and the cage bounced again, hard. The falling Barrier had caught the bottom of the lift and clung there.

"You're a blessing, Mish," Aili said, breathless. The boy rested his head against her chest, in a long, reassuring hug. He hadn't a worry in the world.

A wave from Sarrin jolted the cage again.

"Enough of that!" Kynan lowered her shoulders and stiffened her jaw. She pushed one palm outward, peering hard at the zealot. When Sarrin hurled her next wave, a thunderous crack sounded beneath the cage. An invisible torrent rebounded, knocking Sarrin and several of her people from their feet.

The ability to throw up a shield, Aili thought. A power well suited to her impassive, rock-strong friend. Kynan hadn't manifested any powers of that order yet when Aili had left Skygrave.

"What's she doing now?" the old woman said, her voice a hoarse whisper. Huddled in the corner, she peeked down at Sarrin.

The zealot had regained her feet and watched the lift's continued ascent with a steady glare. Then she lowered her head and folded her arms across her chest. Aili gasped, losing her breath without warning, without apparent reason. Her head reeled, and she fell against the bars behind her.

Even Kynan wavered. Below, the zealots around Sarrin fell to their knees in ever-widening rings. Energy flowed toward Sarrin in a massive whirlpool.

"That's . . . a Progenitor power . . . if I've ever seen one," Aili said, fighting for breath. "Sucking energy from other . . . Barriers. Sarrin is using an artifact."

"Brace yourself," Kynan whispered, wheezing.

Sarrin thrust her hand upward again. The deafening crack this time was Kynan's shield shattering. One of the four metal bands joining the cage to its chains snapped with a deep twang. Aili let go of one bar to hug Mish closer. This wave was going to be rough. People were going to fall. The cage was going to . . .

. . . sway, back and forth, to a gentle stop. They had risen above Sarrin's reach, more than fifty floors above the city floor, and only halfway up the high tower. Zealots ran inside the building, but the lift cage was too far above them when they appeared on the highest balcony. Aili released her breath, and Kynan slumped against the side of the cage.

At the landing, seven floors from the top of the tower, Barriers helped the women and the child from the cage. Bura met them there, her braids lopsided and looping down one side of her head.

"What now?" she asked.

Kynan stood with one hand pressed to her forehead, recovering herself.

"The main vault," Aili said, glancing toward the uppermost level. "It's the most secure place in the city. With Sarrin having access to the lower thirty vaults, we'll need a strong position. I wouldn't guarantee she won't find something below to help her follow us."

Kynan nodded, and the bulk of the loyal Barriers followed her up the stairs to the last, most sacred of the Barrier chambers. Inside, Kynan and her counselors set to strategizing over the ledgers listing what artifacts lay within the main vault. Aili stood with Mish's hand in her own and gaped.

The main vault. It was a circular chamber protected by a heavy metal door an arm's length thick. A circular onyx inlay superceded by a mother-of-pearl sun gleamed on the bronze slab. Aili and Mish stepped through the doorway onto a black marble floor polished to so high a sheen that they saw their shoes and the colors of their clothing reflected there. The boy squeezed her hand, and she squeezed his back, and they walked together to the center of the chamber.

The clear expanse of marble floor seemed to await the dancers in a courtly ball or a master mage engaged in a ritual capable of shaking the world to its core. Curved shelves lined with all manner of amulet, potion, and magical tool formed neat aisles and rows back to the walls. At the far end of each aisle glowed a fist-sized lighting gem set into the relief of an enormous eye.

"An hour ago," Aili said, more to herself than anyone else, "I'd have given anything to find a way up here. I thought the end of my journey awaited me in this chamber."

"Maybe," Mish said, and nothing more.

"Come on, little one. Let's see what Chief Steward Kynan is going to let us Barriers play with."

She had just turned back toward the door and the heavy wooden table, dark and carved with the image of roses, where Kynan sat. The vault door was closing, slow and smooth. No one noticed until the sound of it sealing echoed through the chamber. All the Barriers in the room stood and stared at one another. Aili swallowed but could not dislodge a knot of dread in her throat.

"There's nothing to fear," Kynan said at last, when the silence threatened to suffocate. "The door has a release on the inside, in case it ever closed while the vaultkeeper was busy in the stacks. I don't know that we want to open it just now, though. We can assume the zealot sealed us in."

"I can tell if this is the case," Bura said, stepping forward. Kynan nodded.

"What will you do?" Aili asked.

"I can see into and through the metal."

Aili tugged at her lower lip with her teeth and eyed Kynan. "First, check to make sure the interior door release is working." She had a bad feeling.

The girl pressed her hand to the vault door and closed her eyes. The Barriers around her waited. She gasped, and her eyes popped open.

Kynan grabbed Bura by the arms, as she trembled and muttered to herself. "What is it?"

"All the internal mechanisms, they're rusted in place. I can feel the decay creeping through them." The girl shook her head, her shoulders sinking. "That's Noyl's power at work. Noyl did this to us." Bura's eyes shone with panic. Kynan held her up, kept her from folding into a heap on the floor.

Letting go of Mish's hand, Aili joined Kynan. "Noyl?" she asked.

"One of the men I left guarding the landing. One of my *hand-picked* few." Kynan snorted, looking waxen and dismal.

"Don't count yourself too much the fool, Kynan," Aili told her, seeing the betrayal and the sense of failure in her friend's eyes. She understood having her perception of her own life turned upside down. "These events make us all see more clearly." Then to Bura, she said, "Go ahead now. Use your power again. Tell us what's beyond the door. Go on."

Bura fell against the door, weary. She pressed both her hands and her cheek to the metal, looking as thought she was just holding herself up more than anything else. "Yes, it's the zealot. She's just outside, talking to . . . to her people, and several of ours."

Aili turned to the thick leather ledgers on the table and scanned random pages, line after line. "Fourth row," she called out, and a Barrier scurried to answer her command. "Second case, third shelf. Bring me the green velvet bag."

Bag in hand, Aili withdrew a light blue tourmaline that filled her palm.

Kynan raised her hand in a gesture of caution. "We don't know what that one does yet. We've tried sounding many of these, but-"

"It helps having Travelers around. You'll not find an artifact we haven't tried out before turning it in, and we're free with information amongst ourselves." She knelt at Bura's feet, beside the door, and looked up at Kynan. "It's a communications gem. It should amplify my thoughts. The Progenitors would have each kept one of these in their chambers and used them to speak to one another from Dome to Dome. Paired with Bura's ability to see through the metal, I should be able to talk to Sarrin."

"If you think that will do any good," Kynan said, arching one brow.

"Okay. Okay, there," Bura said, still pressed against the door. "I can see the zealot. Whatever you're going to do, get it over with."

Holding the gem in one hand, Aili pressed the fingertips of the other against the cold metal. Her first mental image of Sarrin through Bura's psychic eyes was painful, sudden, slicing. Aili recoiled, but made herself slap her hand back flat against the door. The image was there again, with a dull ache behind her eyes.

"Sarrin."

The zealot closed her eyes, wincing, then turned to glare at the vault door. Bewildered, those talking with her a moment before focused their eyes in the direction of Sarrin's gaze.

"Sarr-," Aili began.

"Give me the location of the final chalice, and you will have the opportunity to repent, Traveler," Sarrin said. Her voice was cold, flat, demanding, even filtered through thick metal and the magical crystal. The woman's ability to identify her from this barest touching of minds left Aili

anxious.

"I don't know the location. You arrived before I could discover it, but the vaults are now yours to search."

The angles of Sarrin's face, too smooth and fine, overly sculpted, shifted into a shrewd squint and a tight smile. "You would not have suggested that to me had you not already learned the truth about the chalice, the *chamber*."

Sarrin's satisfaction was so palpable to Aili that she wondered if the zealot felt the moment of panic that tightened her chest.

"You obviously know more about it than I do," Aili said. "I think you know more about a lot of relics than I do, if that energy drain is any indication. You've collected something more powerful than anything I've ever found."

The zealot's marble-white face shifted again, and her smile disappeared.

A weak chuckle drifted into Aili's voice, though the aching mounted inside her head. "Indeed, you seem to know how to handle Progenitor relics quite well. You share the skill of a Traveler. Were you, Sarrin? Were you a Traveler?"

The woman's light eyes shot round and glimmered with passion. She stepped up to the door and slapped her hands against the metal. It felt to Aili like a physical blow, and she gasped and fell from her knees. She slumped against the door, just managing to keep her fingertips upon the bronze slab and her connection to Sarrin intact. She was glad to feel a body pressed behind her, hugging her and holding her up. It felt like Kynan.

"You were," Aili said in a heavy breath. "You *were* a Traveler."

Sarrin didn't answer, only scowled.

Aili rested her cheek against the soothing coolness of the door. The chill helped fight the headache and the nausea. "And I bet," she continued with effort, "that you understand the Traveler affinity for magical study better than you'd like to admit to any of your followers."

"You waste your breath, Traveler, and you have precious little to spare in there. Where is the last chalice?"

"I know you're going to destroy it, Sarrin. With the welcome you've received here, you can probably even convince Skygrave to seal their vaults. Maybe they'll pull down the high tower."

Sarrin's subtle, crooked smile appeared again at the suggestion. She obviously liked hearing Aili admit defeat.

"But before you do that, I'd really like to know, Sarrin. Have you always just walled up the chalice chambers? Just destroyed them? Did you study any of them? Did you *enter* any of them?"

The zealot's gaze hardened, and Aili knew she'd hit upon something.

"Surely, Sarrin, as a Traveler, you'd only destroy a chalice after understanding it, experiencing it."

"Your blasphemy doesn't serve you, Traveler."

"I am well aware that, while you may allow some of the Barriers in this vault repent and join you, you have no intention of letting me or any other Traveler live. So you might as well give me one favor and tell me the truth, Sarrin. It is true? Does the chalice hold the secret for leaving the Dome?" No answer, no movement. "Have you ever, Sarrin? Have you ever used a chalice to leave or look, *just look* outside the Dome? Have you seen the world, Sarrin?"

When Sarrin leaned into the door, so near that no one else would hear, Aili thought she could feel the heat of breath against her cheek. They shared a deep, hate-filled intimacy.

"You think you want to know me, see through my eyes, little Traveler?"

"I think I do know you. I think we're too alike for you to stand. What happened to you,

Sarrin? Did your nomad parents trade you to the Barriers, too? Did they see you fan the dying campfire embers with a glance or swat a rat without touching it? Did they bargain with the Barriers over you or just leave you tied up outside a city-dome? Were they afraid of you, Sarrin?"

"You don't know enough to recognize what you should fear." Sarrin scratched her long white nails down the door. Aili shuddered and arched as the sensation scraped the nerves along her spine.

"Did you become a Traveler to prove," Aili said, gasping through the terrible burning, crawling pain, "to prove to *them* that magic wasn't a sign you were tainted? What did you find that convinced you that you were?"

The pain dissipated. Through her sigh of relief, she heard only Sarrin's breathing.

"You want to know?" Sarrin said at last. "All right. Yes, I have seen the world. It is a dead black ruin wrought by the hands of men at a scale so vast only magic could have achieved it. The flame of life is gone, and we are embers that do not know enough to die before scorching ourselves."

And what could Aili say to that? She shook her head, whispering, "I don't believe-"

"Was that a comfort to you on your last day, Traveler?"

"I . . . don't believe-"

"No? Then take comfort in this. No blessing and burial rites for you, Traveler, not for any of you. A cart ride to the nearest twistwood, and your bodies left for the beasts. And we'll find the chalice chamber anyway. It will all be over soon, girl."

Sarrin pulled her hands from the door, whirled, and strode away.

"No, Sarrin." Aili wheezed. "Sarrin. Sarrin!" But she was gone.

Aili fell back into Kynan's arms, panting, still whispering the zealot's name. She had to get Sarrin back here, had to puzzle out a way to make the woman listen. She could not—would not—believe . . .

A small hand on her arm made Aili turn her head. The sight of bright-cheeked Mish gazing at her, so calm, stilled Aili's frantic thoughts. Her mind focused. Above all other concerns, one ascended to prominence. She could not let this child die.

It was the main vault. Progenitor relics lay all around them. Surely they were not defenseless.

* * *

Hours later, when the air had grown much thinner, Aili collapsed into a cross-legged heap beside Mish. Oblivious to the impending horror of their deaths, even as Barriers wept and comforted one another in darkened corners, the child played with his coins on the floor.

The golden gauntlet that should have allowed Kynan to batter down the vault door was a dented heap that had to be pried off the Chief Steward's bruised and bloodied hand. A magical wall held fast on the other side of the passage. A harp that should have allowed Bura to renew and coax the rusted locking mechanisms into movement filled the chamber with plaintive, lonely music but could not reverse the decay as quickly as Noyl replaced it from beyond. The silver wand that should have allowed Aili to draw a portal in the air, creating a doorway to anyplace she envisioned, time and again produced passages that led back only to the main vault. The ward to turn the portal back on itself was too simple, and Aili was not surprised that someone among Sarrin's followers knew it.

Mish's singing coaxed Aili back from her dismal thoughts, comforting her.

"*When I close my eyes*

I can see spring.

I see the beginning of all things."

Such a beautiful, hopeful voice, fitting for him. Amid her fatigue, anger rose within Aili

again. Sarrin had no right to be the death of this boy. So little in the Domes brought joy rather than depression and defeat.

Without really intending to, Aili reached out and put her arm around Mish. He didn't seem to need comforting, but she did.

"*When I close my eyes*
I drift to sleep and dream
Of the clouds beneath my feet
When I close my eyes."

Aili found herself humming along. It was a mild, infectious song.

The child paused for a breath, and Aili asked, "Did your parents teach you that song?"

Mish shook his head. "The wind taught it to me in my dreams."

"The wind?"

"Out there."

Aili nodded. What wonderful dreams the boy had. At least he would die with those pleasant memories. They were more than most Barriers had.

"*When I close my eyes . . .*"

Those notes were the hardest to get out of one's mind, sharp and promising as they ascended along a scale that tugged at the heart. Aili hummed them, over and over, in time with Mish. The air was dangerously thin by then. Her mind had fallen into a fog. She reeled where she sat, barely able to keep herself upright.

"*When I close my eyes . . .*"

She kept humming along. The lighting gems seemed to flicker in time. She thought she must have been hallucinating. The child kept singing, and the lighting gems kept flickering, in time with that one catching line. Aili giggled, noting again that the lighting gems were set into the wall in large eyes. Lighting gems . . .

Aili stumbled to her feet and tripped across the room, past Bura still hugging that harp and Kynan still studying the ledgers for ideas, though without hope or vigor. Her thoughts were clear enough that she told herself that people would begin suffocating soon, struggling for breath. Perhaps it would be better if they didn't have to watch it happening to one another, if the child did not see. She grasped a metal lip along the upper lid of one of the eyes and pulled a shutter down over the gem. She shuffled around the room, closing the eyes one by one, in time to Mish's song.

She left the gem behind Mish for last. She wanted him to be able to play with his coins as long as possible. Leaning against the wall, she watched him and wondered if Sarrin had found the last chalice yet, if the zealot had told her the truth . . .

From the far side of the room, the first sounds of choking and wheezing cut through the thick atmosphere of fear. Mish's voice caught. He stopped singing.

A tear slid down Aili's cheek. "Don't stop, Mish. Keep singing."

"*When I close my eyes . . .*"

The last gem flickered in time, just before Aili closed it. A loud, grating click echoed through the vault. The floor shook and a rumble like the roar of an enormous beast swallowed them up. Aili lost her footing, falling against one of the artifact cases. A shaft of light shot up from the center of the chamber, beyond the shelves. Aili couldn't see the source.

"Get back!" someone said, straining to shout over the roar. The shuddering of the marble beneath their feet worsened. Heavy tiles shivered and bounced. "Get back! Toward the shelves! The floor-!"

Aili scrambled to her feet and dashed down the aisle as the floor in the center of the chamber

dilated. A rush of light and air blew her backward and tossed her to the floor again. The choking and gasping from around the room stopped and became cries of amazement. Aili grabbed a heavy table to steady herself. She stared out at a huge hole in the chamber floor, gaping over a charred black landscape far, *far* below.

Sarrin had told her the truth. This was the world. Black, barren, scarred by fire and war. Only the crumbling skeletons of dead trees rose above the mottled carpet of soot and ash.

Kynan stumbled toward Aili, shouting over the thunderous din. "The doorway you talked about! The doorway! But how?"

Aili shook her head, clinging to the table as wind from the gap flapped robes and ripped brittle texts from shelves. Then she saw him. Mish had wandered out of the stacks to the edge of the hole. He pointed down through it and smiled.

"Out there!" He clapped with joy, though it was a clumsy effort as he held his pouch of coins. "Aili, let's go! Let's go out there!"

She knelt and held out her arms. "No, Mish. Come here." He ran to her, and she hugged him near. "We can't, Mish. We have no way down, and we wouldn't survive there. There's nothing, little one. It's a wasteland."

The child shook his head and patted Aili's shoulder, as though . . . in sympathy. "You see what you always see. See what you don't always see."

Aili looked back through the hole. "I'm sorry, Mish. It's just a ruin."

The quaking still mounted. Kynan fell to her knees beside Aili. For a moment, the two childhood friends stared at one another, outside the context of resentment, abandonment, Barriers and nomads and twistwoods. Two childhood friends staring at one another.

The room seemed sideways for a moment, as though tipped by the shuddering all around it. Aili hugged the table leg and Mish close.

"Is this an illusion?" she asked Kynan. "Or is something happening outside?"

Kynan shook her head and looked over at Bura. The girl scampered on her hands and knees to the door and pressed her cheek to the metal again.

"Chaos outside as well," she said, still "seeing." "Much panic. They . . . they think it's something we're doing. They're going to open the doors! Sarrin is telling them to kill us!"

Mish struggled out of Aili's arms. He ran to the edge of the hole and looked back at her, for just a moment. "See, Aili!"

"No!" Aili leapt toward Mish, but it was too late. The boy threw himself into the gap. The wind seemed to catch him, pull him out of sight. "Mish," she whispered, her hands fisted in her hair. She didn't want to hear him fall, didn't want to hear him scream. She didn't . . . hear him at all, not at first. Then beyond the rumbling and the hiss of wind, she heard a high giggle, *down there*. *Out there*.

"He did this," Kynan said, huddled near so Aili could hear her. "Mish did this, I know. Or . . . or it's because of him. But how?"

Aili kept staring at the hole, straining to hear anything through it. She only heard the wind, stone popping against stone as it fractured, and the grating of the metal door as people worked outside to open it.

"You said there was no telling what being born in the chamber of the chalice had done to him. What if . . . if he carried the power of a Progenitor out with him? For all purposes, he was *born* inside all that remained of a Progenitor!"

"But why haven't we seen anything like this before from him? Berries and strange visions, yes, but . . ." Kynan motioned toward the breech.

Aili thought about the vault, about the nature of it and all the magical barriers Sarrin had put

up around it. "Since he left the chamber of the chalice, is this not the first time he's ever been in a totally *sealed* chamber? There is no twisted magic here. He *is* the chalice, Kynan! In a high vault of the Progenitors, we contained the power of a great mage, allowed him to sing and produce vibratory tones that elevated the energies. Then I closed the shutters on the lighting gems, the last items within this chamber that could tap his powers. His abilities peak, and the doorway opens!"

But it was the vault door that opened then. Aili's first, momentary fear was that unsealing the chamber would close the doorway, but the gap remained as zealots fought their way into the room through shifting winds and bright light. A gnarled, lumbering man looking like a twistwood tree himself stumbled toward Bura where she cowered at the foot of an artifact case. His girth lurched toward her, a tarnished sword raised in his hand. Bura shook her head, more a trembling, really. She never screamed, but he did, as the wind grasped him as surely as a fist and dragged him through the breech.

The vault became a tangle of bodies and movement and flashing blades. Barrier struggled with Barrier. Bura tripped another zealot backward through the gap. Sarrin herself shoved two of Kynan's faithful after her own. Aili and Kynan huddled under the table, grabbed the robes of zealots, and dragged them to the floor. Having bitten an arach to save her life, Aili was unfazed by the thought of biting, clawing and kicking the zealots into dropping their swords. She hurled the weapons out of reach.

More zealots poured into the room. Kynan's people were outnumbered. That's when her Barriers began, one by one or in groups of two or three, to step up to the edge of the gap and fall forward rather than allow Sarrin's people to kill them and defile their remains. Tears filled the Chief Steward's eyes.

The wind coursed ever stronger. Kynan wrapped one arm around the table leg while trying to grasp Bura's robe as the girl rose to her feet beside the portal. "No!" Kynan flailed and screamed after her as the young Barrier stepped into thin air.

Aili cupped Kynan's tear-streaked face in her hand. "Kynan! Kynan, yes."

The Chief Steward's eyes flared, and she shook her head as Aili crawled out from under the table. At the mouth of the breech, Aili turned to see Sarrin and many of her zealots clinging to tables, shelves, one another. Massive cracks streaked along the vault walls. No one could find their footing.

Aili gaped at the ruined landscape below. The height, the thought of jumping, even suspecting what she did, made her stomach turn and sink inside her body.

"No!" Kynan clamped her uninjured hand around Aili's ankle.

"It's all right, Kynan," she shouted back over the roar of wind and crumbling stone, of sobbing and cursing. "I understand Mish. I understand why it had to be here."

The woman kept shaking her head, loose tendrils of hair writhing about her contorted face.

Aili kept a careful eye on Sarrin as she nudged closer to the hole above the world. She shifted her gaze from Sarrin to Kynan to the portal and back. As though reading Aili's intentions from her face, Sarrin thrust her hand out, face intent with concentration. Aili braced for the impact she knew could easily toss her over the artifact cases behind her. But . . . nothing happened. Sarrin muttered and traced symbols in the air, and again nothing happened. Was it the breech, Aili thought, draining the magic away?

The zealot cursed and threw herself toward Aili. Lying flat against the floor, she kept the wind from snatching her up. She crawled toward Aili and Kynan, a dagger clutched in one fist.

"We have to go, Kynan! We have to go now!"

"It's death!"

"No." Aili was certain now. "He said we see what we always see. That's why I couldn't see

promise or hope in Skygrave, after being abandoned here, and why I couldn't recognize it as my home when I arrived in search of the chalice. It's why Sarrin can't see."

She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed in the wind. It smelled of soot and ash and . . . grass, fresh grass. She opened her eyes and looked down again. The view was still a ruin, *but it wavered*.

"I'm not letting go of you!" Behind Aili, Kynan's expression—her pinched mouth and steady stare—was hard and determined.

"Come with me, Kynan," Aili said, stretching one hand back toward her friend. She glanced Sarrin's way. The zealot edged closer, a cloud of platinum hair swirling around her head. "We have to go now."

Aili watched Kynan's gaze darted between her and Sarrin, the gap and the open vault door.

"Skygrave," Kynan whispered. Aili read her lips. Then, louder, Kynan said, "I can't leave it. I'm Chief Steward, Barrier." She caught her quivering lower lip in her teeth. "We grew up here."

Though Sarrin was almost upon then, Aili turned back to close her hands on Kynan's arm. She brought her face close to Kynan's and kissed her on the cheek. "You stayed and cared for our home, and you opened my eyes to it when you returned. Now let me give you what I have learned as a Traveler. Trust, Kynan. The unknown is not so great as the fear of it."

"Skygrave," Kynan mouthed again, one welling tear breaking down her round cheek.

"You bring it with you, in everything it made you."

Aili crawled toward the breech again, but Kynan still had not released her ankle.

"Not you, Traveler!" Sarrin swiped out with her blade. The tip bit into the back of Kynan's hand, slicing a thin pink line so fine it drew no blood. "No, no easy death for you!" She lurched closer, giving her room to draw her dagger higher for the strike.

In a fit of fear for Kynan, Aili kicked her leg. She tried to dislodge her friend, to knock Kynan back from harm's way. Kynan held fast, but in the struggle, they swung away from a swipe aimed to slash both the Chief Steward's hand and Aili's leg. Sarrin came to her knees.

"Kynan," Aili screamed.

And Kynan let go, not of Aili but of the table leg. Together the friends, the last of the loyal Skygrave Barriers, slid into the breech, easy and smooth. The wind stole Aili's breath. She closed her eyes, too breathless to cry out her panic. She felt herself tossed, felt Kynan's hand lose its grip. Then she was falling, trying to tell herself she still believed, even while trembling and sobbing halfheartedly. She refused to change her mind. She *believed* Mish.

With a surge of bravery, Aili opened her eyes. She was falling, but not as fast as she thought. She was . . . almost . . . floating. Below her lay a deep valley in the cupped hand of mountains, purple-gray and looming near. Maples embroidered the hillsides in burgundy, teal, and gold, all more vivid than Aili had known color could be. The dawn light was gentle with her eyes, sifting between the peaks by degrees.

Mish's dreams, she thought. This is what they must have been like. So beautiful that a girl raised beneath a dull black sky could not bear them without tears that trailed upward on her face in the wind. If she died now, so be it. This sight was worth her life.

Aili landed in a pool of shadow in knee-high grass as soft as silk. The blades hissed and swished as she tumbled through them. She knew she had fallen a league, at least, yet her trip ended with an impact no harder than rolling onto the floor from bed. Bura and Mish ran to greet her, as others greeted Kynan a few feet away.

While Mish hugged her leg, Aili stood and stared into the sky. She fought the panic of realizing the vastness of the space looming above her, so open that she feared for a moment she could full upward into it. A thick bank of what could only be clouds washed across the firmament, directly

over them a moment before, moving off now along with the shadow cast over the grassland. In spots the clouds were white, in others black and laced with white lightning. They shuddered with the weight of the storm roiling within them. When the cloud reached sufficient distance, Bura pointed at the black orbs visible atop them.

"The Domes," Aili said. Mish's song. *I drift to sleep and dream of the clouds beneath my feet*. "Does it look like . . . like the Domes are shaking?"

Before anyone could respond, fragments of the black orbs began to break off. Shards of onyx fell *upward,* into the sky. While they watched, the orbs crumbled and the clouds folded into themselves, into nothing.

Beside Aili, Kynan let out a sharp breath. "The Domes are gone . . . The Progenitors . . . they must have expected us all to leave once we opened the doorway, once someone finally went through."

Mish gave a great nod. "Once you were ready."

"We weren't," Aili said, "but here we are."

Mish turned and pointed into the trees at the edge of the clearing. "Look!" Real trees instead of twistwoods. Aili heaved in a deep breath. The musk of flower and leaf, decay and new growth, of fresh soil, was overpowering. She coughed and wrinkled her nose, resisting the threat of her nervous stomach.

"That's where we should be!" Mish dashed off, his tiny legs as sure as if he'd been born running these hills.

"Gods!" Kynan gaped with Aili as their gazes rose above Mish and the treetops to the single great oak stretching higher than the forest canopy. It was the size of a high tower. There was no doubt Mish was running toward that tree.

Aili and Kynan, Bura and other Barriers all ran after the boy, past several of Sarrin's people where they stood wordless, motionless, gazing in the direction of the clouds that had just disappeared. The twisting course through vines and flowers beneath the trees slowed Aili and the others. She wanted to stop, examine every petal and leaf, but Mish . . . He already stood beneath the solid, outstretched boughs of the great tree when they caught up to him. He bent over, pulling his coins out of the sack and arranging them on the ground.

Aili knelt before the child. "What is this, Mish? You know this place from your dreams. Tell us."

At one moment, he regarded Aili with the wide, joyous eyes of a child, and at the next with a gleam of uncommon wisdom. As though the essence of someone else entirely had joined him there, behind those eyes. Mish turned his head to look up at the great tree, then toward the distant dissipating wisp of storm clouds and back again.

His voice was many voices—and his own—when he spoke. "We have returned to the earth, to the foot of the Tree of Life. Man's journey begins anew, from the root of mortal life to the crown of heaven."

Kynan knelt at Aili's elbow. "What . . . does that mean? Was . . . was there never a war? Was the land never ruined?"

Aili shook her head, shrugged. "Perhaps there was. Or the orbs were just a step in a journey to reach, as he said, the crown of heaven . . . Bending magic to the will of man, making greater and greater choices of what to use that power to do. It failed us somewhere, or we failed it."

"So we start anew?" Kynan asked. The suggestion of a smile curled the corners of her mouth.

Aili was watching Mish. He had taken a handful of his coins and approached the lowest bough. There, fool's gold fungus grew in semi-circular disks, like precious coins lodged in the blond

bark. Into empty impressions, Mish fitted his coins, and a shiver of energy quivered its way up Aili's back. The tree shuddered, gently, and a soft rain of leaves fell. When all had settled again, a scattering of white cranes stood in the deep blue shade. Mish's coins were seeds . . . the keys to repopulating the world—Mish's seeds and *them*.

Bura and the other Barriers clustered around Mish, marveling as he brought forth flowers, animals, acorns, seeds. A distance off, Aili and Kynan stood in silence, side by side, both in need of sleep. In the calm, they found one another's hands and held tight. Aili glanced down, at the mage marks, thinking that there were no bandages this time, as they entered this new world. Then she looked to the sky, perhaps a bit nervous about the growing light. Brighter out there, Mish had said.

Then another thought came to Aili, and she squeezed Kynan's hand. "Tonight, old friend, we see our stars."

The End

Leave a message for this story.

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blue - my mask of strength broken. Embarrassed, I didn't hesitate when my brother entered the cave. I followed him inside.

The cave opened up into a large chamber. Shadows hid much of its jagged ceiling and walls. More teeth jutted through the dirt floor, making it difficult to walk in the dim light. I turned, following my brother, then stopped.

An enormous egg, the size of a hut, lay on its side in the middle of the cave's dirt floor. But it wasn't brown or any other color. Like the calm waters of the weir pool, its smooth surface reflected my image and that of my brother.

I screamed.

Strong Heart smirked, reached out, and touched it.

I gasped.

Ignoring me, he ran his hand across its surface. Nothing happened.

Stepping cautiously, I came beside him and felt its surface myself. Cold and damp, smooth like an egg, without crack or crevice.

My brother pounded on it with his fist and it made a deep sound like thunder.

Solid as a rock, I thought. My eyes grew wide. "What animal laid this?"

Strong Heart laughed. "Steel," he said reassuringly. "The white man makes it." He walked behind it. I followed him, not wanting to be very far away. On its far side, its maker had cut a smooth triangle into its thick shell, creating a doorway the size of a man. A steel hut, I thought.

"Don't go inside!"

He turned and grinned at me. Stepping further into the twilight of the cave, something caught his foot and he fell.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

He sat up and began poking at the dirt. After a few seconds he turned towards me, raising a human skull in one hand. Setting it aside, he began to dig. "Help me! The white man might have burial treasure here."

I stood firm. It was wrong to desecrate this place. It held black magic. I watched and said nothing.

He pulled something else up.

I thought I recognized it. "Is that a short fire stick, like the one the fur trader has?"

He nodded. "You mean a pistol. Let me show you." My brother wrapped a hand around it and squeezed. The pistol roared and lit up the cave with a flash of blue light as it pushed my brother's hand back into his face.

I cried out, my ears ringing. Then I saw my brother slumped on the floor. I scrambled to him. A large welt grew where the pistol had struck. I shook him, but he remained asleep. What could I do? I looked from him to the pistol. Only one thought came to mind. Father would know what to do. As the village shaman he could break the pistol's curse. I picked up the pistol. It felt cold to the touch, like the icy river. Grimacing, I slipped it beneath my waistband and grabbed my brother.

I managed to carry and drag my brother as far as the weir pool. Three men in a canoe saw me and helped bring him to the village. The village stood high on a hill to escape the seasonal river floods. A grove of trees sheltered it from the wind.

We carried him past a couple of wooden huts to the gathering place in center of the village. Sitting on vertebrae taken from a beached whale last summer, a few older men tended the large fire pit. Nearby, some young girls surrounded a pile of beads, rings and bracelets. One of them tossed two plum seeds, scorched black and etched with stars and quarter moons on either side. They were gambling.

"Strong Heart is hurt!" I cried.

All heads turned and they saw us carrying him. The old men went to my family's hut to prepare my brother's bed. The girls ran to the berry patch to get my mother, discarding their wagers.

Entering my family's hut, we laid him down on a mat of woven reeds. My mother came to his side, out of breath. Worry creased the lines on her face. She flashed me a look and I left the hut. Outside, my father waited.

Stern brown eyes met my gaze. He was heavier than I, with graying hair and patchy brown skin. Thin lines of charcoal tattoos ran the length of his back, elbows, and ankles; medicine to ward off back pain. But in every other way we looked the same. He was an older and wiser version of me.

Taking a deep breath, I handed him the pistol.

He turned it over and asked, "Where did you find this?"

"In a cave, near a skeleton. There was a hut..."

He shook his head. "This thing should have stayed there. It's cursed. Your brother would have known."

"He wouldn't wake."

My father rubbed his chin. "You've disturbed its dead owner."

I nodded, feigning that I understood the implication he was making.

"You need to return it."

I shook my head. "But Strong Heart is ill…"

"Alone." He fixed me with a stare from behind folds of sun-etched skin. "You do this alone."

"But he found it!"

"Bright Eyes, you took it!" he said, swatting my nose with a forefinger.

I bowed my head, feeling my lower lip tremble. I bit it to keep from crying.

He raised his hands and walked away. "Don't blame me. The Great Owl has said it is so."

I stood, watching my father leave. I couldn't go back there. It would be low tide soon. I'd miss the harvest. And it would be dark in the cave. What if I told him about the steel hut in the cave? I started to follow him when I heard a sound. "Psst!"

I turned.

It was the fur trader, beckoning me with a finger. Or did he mean someone else? I looked around but saw no one. Over the past few years my father had paid the trader to teach me the white man's written words. The trader must mean to give me another lesson. There wasn't time!

The trader made some more sounds in his language, which ended in a fit of coughing.

I sighed and walked toward him to find out what he wanted. Like many white men, he was covered from head to foot with filthy clothes; his face was shrouded in hair except for the area around his nose and eyes. His ears protruded though his hair like the nubs of a deer that recently lost its horns, only lower. And his eyes were red and moist. A breeze carried his scent of urine and filth to me. It was stronger than usual. I pinched my nose and took a step back.

He pointed to the pistol, turned, and pointed towards his moving hut just outside the village. He meant to teach me the word. Why didn't he just write it in the dirt? I didn't understand, but I followed him to his camp. Upon reaching it he sneezed, wiped the back of his hand across his nose, and pointed to the pistol. Then he grabbed a bear fur from the back of his moving hut and shook it.

I looked down, appalled. He meant to trade, not teach. But I needed to return the pistol to the cave to break the curse.

He grunted, sneezed again, and pulled out a white man's woven shirt like the one he wore and shook it.

Finally, I understood. He was trying to help me. As a white man, he could break the curse.

I looked at the mountain again. Long shadows of the late afternoon had started to run across it. I shivered.

The man hacked and spat out some phlegm, tinged red. He pointed once more to the pistol and then to the non-fur shirt.

I nodded and made the exchange.

I heard people shouting from my home. I ran up the dirt trail and pushed through the crowded entryway. People gave way, and I slipped inside my family's wooden hut. I found my brother awake, hugging my crying mother. I smiled. The curse was broken. No, I had broken the curse. My first spell. This was even better than my brother's scar. My father would be proud.

Arriving at the weir, I could see my father and village men at the shallow pool. The tide had retreated back to the ocean, leaving the fish stranded. I took my position next to my father. Thrusting a three-pronged spear into the water, I impaled a fish and flung it ashore.

My father cleared his throat and then spoke. "Strong Heart is awake."

I nodded, turning to face him.

"And you returned the pistol to the cave."

I said nothing. *Had I done the right thing?*

He coughed and then smiled. "Your magic is strong. You'll make a good shaman some day."

I felt the corners of my mouth curl into a smile, unable to repress my happiness.

He coughed again, but this time more violently. His face became red and he had to sit down.

I laid my spear aside. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head and clutched his chest. "I feel weak. My chest hurts."

The curse! Perhaps my magic is not as strong as I thought. A couple of men helped me bring him back to the village.

My mother met us at the threshold of our hut. "What happened?"

I looked at the ground. "I don't know. He collapsed."

My mother, visibly worried, took my father in and laid him down next to Strong Heart.

Strong Heart turned to her. "It'll be all right." He winked at me and smiled.

Guilt pierced me like a fishing spear. I turned and ran out of the hut. I had to find the fur trader. I ran up and down the deer trails, along the creek side, and over the bluffs above the ocean. But the fur trader had left, and my hope to end the curse left with him.

For three days my father burned hot, coughing up thick phlegm that turned pink and then red with blood. My brother and I ran baskets filled with river water to dowse him. But they didn't cool his burning spirit. He gripped his chest, acting as if an arrow or axe had pierced it. But the white man's curse, like an invisible arrow, left no mark on his body. He died.

We built a thatch platform near the river as Father had taught us. The village surrounded him to show their respect. My brother lifted his body high upon the thatch platform while my father's best friend, Wise Fox, chanted the prayer to take him to the afterworld. Gazing into his eyes, I lit the thatch on fire. All during the song his gaze remained fixed, starring up at me, accusing me, asking me why. Tears streaked my face. I silently cried that night, knowing I had killed him.

The curse ran like wildfire through the village, killing many and weakening many more. The village became quiet. Old men no longer tended the fire and told stories. Young girls no longer giggled while gambling their beads, rings, and bracelets. People stayed inside, living off their winter stores, surviving on berries and salted meats. A week later Wise Fox came and visited us. I noticed strange boils on his arms, black and hard.

"What is going to happen?"

He smiled grimly and cleared his throat. "It will pass."

"How can you be sure?"

"When I was a young boy, not much older than you, perhaps fifty winters ago, a flood ripped through the village. Many died, including my mother and brother. But many more lived. My father told me that every generation has a trial, whether it is a windstorm, a flood, a drought, a fire, a famine, or even a curse. He told me that hundreds of years ago the Great Owl stopped the first trial, a curse, by painting a white star in the sky with a long wispy tail. Since the curse has returned, so will the star. But we must remain strong until then." He began coughing and sat back. We thanked him for the last time. He retreated out of our hut. I never saw him again.

After three days the curse attacked Mother, but this time it left its marks. Painful bumps the size of acorns appeared on her neck and armpits. They kept her up most of the night. By morning we found the marks had grown to the size of duck eggs and turned black and hard. Her spirit burned hot.

My brother and I left the village, carrying her down to the river. We waited on her day and night, submersing her in the weir pool to calm her spirit. But every day her pain grew. Dark blisters and purple blotches formed on her skin and spread to cover most of her body. Her body shook violently at times, leaving her tired and delirious. She resisted longer than Father, taking over a week to die.

But her death was peaceful. Cradled in my brother's arms, she sat in the weir pool, watching the sun set over the ocean one last time before the life left her. He held her that way all night, praying to the Great Owl and searching the sky for His star. But the curse remained.

The next day we built another thatch platform on the ashes of our Father as he had taught us. Come evening we were ready. This time only the two of us appeared for the funeral. Most of the tribe was dead, and those who survived hid in their huts, awaiting the curse. My brother gently lifted her body onto the platform and stepped back, tears streaming down his face. I waited with the torch. But my brother didn't speak the chant.

After a few moments I said, "Brother, chant the prayer that tells her spirit about the path to the Great Owl."

My brother shook his head, tears streaming down his face. "Father never taught me the words."

I was shocked. "Then get someone from the village."

His voice cracked. "They're all gone. Father, Wise Fox, and all the other shamans are gone. No one knows the sacred prayers."

My mouth dropped open. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know." He stifled a cough.

"What happens if I die? How will I find the afterworld? Will I lose my way on the trail?"

"I don't think so. I can't see how the Great Owl would allow this to happen. His star should come soon."

But I knew His star wouldn't come, because I didn't return the pistol to the cave. I started to cry.

My brother placed a firm hand on my shoulder. He helped me to light the thatch. I watched as my mother burned, her gaze fixed on me.

I turned away. "You don't understand."

Concern crossed his face.

I couldn't hold it in any longer. "Brother, I took the pistol from the cave. Father said it was cursed and told me to put it back. But I didn't. I was scared. The fur trader gave me the shirt I'm wearing for it. I thought it would end the curse. But later that day Father fell ill. I tried to find the fur trader, but he had already left."

I couldn't read my brother's expression. He stared at me for several moments, his face a mask of stone. Finally he spoke. "The white man tricked you and lied to the Great Owl?"

A huge weight lifted off my chest. I never thought of that. Of course! That was it! The white man had planned this. The fur trader knew the curse would remain. I nodded. "Yes!"

My brother coughed. His eyes blazed red and moist. "Do you remember the steel hut in the cave? Do you think it holds other pistols?"

I nodded.

"Tomorrow we will find those pistols and set out east to avenge our people." He coughed again. "Sleep well. Tomorrow you'll need your strength."

I awoke early, stepped outside, and stretched. A thick ground fog covered the village. Only the roofs of the huts peeked through, appearing as a field of thatched platforms, shadows of my people.

"Brother, it's time," I called back into the hut.

My brother appeared beside me. I turned to face him. He leaned against the entrance wall, hunched over, his hands under his armpits, face flushed, damp with sweat. I saw the curse's marks on his neck, bumps the size of eggs, surrounded by the dark blisters and dark purple marks.

Straightening up, he smiled, reading the worry on my face. "It's all right, little brother."

"I'll go alone," I said, coughing.

His eyes became firm, resolute. For one last time he passed in front of me, leading the way to the mountain and the cave. He made it as far as the weir, collapsing on the ground, unconscious. The walk had sapped all his strength. I carried him to the pool where we had cared for Mother. I held him in the waters and cried as the life left his body.

I remembered our walks and adventures around the weir. I remembered when he winked at me after I brought my father to the hut. I remembered how gently he lifted my mother on the thatch, and how he cried because he didn't know the chant.

"I will avenge us, my brother. I promise. Many white men will die." I peered up at the cave. Carefully, I propped him up in the weir pool so that his eyes were fixed open, staring at the cave. "When I emerge from there, I will have the answer." I bowed my head and promised the Great Owl that I would stay in the cave until I found a way to avenge our people, or I would die.

Slowly, I climbed the mountain and entered the cave with the white man's steel hut shaped like an egg. At the mouth of the cave I rested, feeling winded. The sickness had started in me. I could feel it. I closed my eyes and felt the wind tug at my hair. I dreamed it was my mother. The thought soothed my soul and gave me strength. Getting up, I entered the cave and walked around the steel hut.

I saw the skull my brother had found. Spitting at it, I kicked it aside, cursing its owner for killing my people. Looking up, I saw the opening, a triangular hole the height of a man in the thick reflective skin of the steel hut. The outer edges were smooth. A pale red light I hadn't noticed last time shone on the cave's dirt floor in front of the opening.

I hesitated for only a moment before slipping inside. Despite having no windows and only one door, an eerie red twilight filled the hut, revealing its steel walls, ceiling and floor. The hut was bare except for a steel seat placed in its center. It faced the back wall and had a thin, flat steel back and sides to support its owner's back and arms. Lights like stars twinkled on the far wall, which looked

bumpy like a gnarled cypress. There I saw two of the white man's words. It read - 'Time shifter.' How can time shift? This made no sense.

Enchanted, I stepped in front of the seat and ran a hand across the gnarled surface. Some of the bumps flattened and changed color. Suddenly, the hut lit up like midday. I heard a roar like a howling wind. I looked around but saw nothing. Fighting my fear, I stayed in the hut, ready to confront whatever demon I had awakened.

The hut lurched and I lost my footing. Tumbling through the air, I hit my head against the back of the steel seat.

I woke to water hitting my face. Salt water poured in through the hut's opening above me as I lay with my back on the far wall, which was now the floor. I stood up in the frigid water. What had happened? I imagined the steel hut rolling down the hill and into the ocean. Already the water had risen to my knees. The back of the steel seat was above me, fixed to what was once the floor. I used it like a tree branch and pulled myself up. Standing up, I examined the opening above me. I grasped the lip of the opening and fought my way through.

Then I was out, submerged. Beneath me the hut fell away. It slowly sank deeper to the distant ocean floor below. I knew, like the pistol, I would never retrieve it. *I failed you, my brother. I found no pistols. I cannot avenge you.* A trail of air bubbles rose from the opening of the steel hut as it sank. I followed them to the surface.

Breaching the surface, I gasped. It was a moonless night. But a bright star with a white trail lit up the sky. The star! It had finally returned. But it came too late for my brother, too late for my people.

I cried. The Great Owl was cruel. Alone I would have to live, knowing my disobedience killed my people.

Under the light of the Great Owl's star, I saw the silhouette of land. Odd peaks, sharp and tall, pierced the night sky. Although I knew the coast for many days' journey north and south of the village, I recognized none of it. Where had the steel hut taken me?

I thought of my brother resting in the weir pool and made a new vow. *Before I die I will return to you, my brother. I will find you on the river and build you a thatch platform, burn your body, and free your soul*. The thought gave me focus, gave me hope.

Floating on my back, I watched the bright star and its wispy tail as I swam toward shore. By the time I reached land, dawn approached, and the star had disappeared. Crawling out of the surf, I collapsed on the beach.

I awoke, the sun warming my back. I felt tired and my head ached. I opened my eyes and sat up with a start. The sand wasn't gray and streaked with black as it should be. Instead, white sand covered the beach, nestled beneath sharp peaks of white crumbling rock. I spun around but found I was alone.

The beach stretched endlessly in both directions. I expected that the currents had dragged the steel hut to the south. After noting the position of the sun, I walked to the cliff to check the moss and determine where the sun crossed the sky. Heaps of rotten food and refuse littered the base of the cliff. Something glinted in one of the heaps. I extracted a round basket with a flat bottom, tapering to a tube-like opening. Smooth, clear, and hard, it smelled of fermented berries. I tested its strength against the stone cliff. Its end shattered. I ran a finger across the ragged end and dropped it. The jagged edge had cut my finger like an obsidian arrowhead. On the ground I saw a white man's paper, but I understood only a few of the words. 'At the beginning of October, in the year of the incarnation of the Son of God 1347...' It spoke of the current season.

I stepped back and surveyed the heaps of trash strewn along the cliff. What else did it mean?

This was white man's trash, I told myself. Then I understood.

The steel hut had returned home, back to the land of the white man. Another curse. More black magic. The thought made me sick and I doubled over, vomiting on the sand. I wrapped my arms around my sides and one of my fingers brushed a bump, shooting pain across my chest. I forced myself to look. Lifting my arm, I could see two blisters the size of acorns forming beneath my armpit. My eyes burned with tears. Despite the star, the curse still plagued me.

I raised a fist to the sky and yelled, "Great Owl, why have You done this? Why did You lie to me about the star?" I heaved again on the beach and pain shot through my legs, causing me to drop to my knees. I fought the pain and fixed my gaze to the sky. "You've killed my family, my people, and taken me to a strange land to die. Why?"

As an answer, the fire in my spirit erupted and I collapsed, passing out on the beach.

When I awoke again, I found myself on a soft bed, covered with the same woven cloths that the fur trader had given me. A white woman sitting near the bed smiled at me. She didn't know me, so why was she smiling? I tried to get up but she pushed me back down, speaking cooing words in her language that I didn't understand. I felt weak all over and couldn't fight her. She fed me and tried to nurse me back to health. But of course, the curse prevented that.

For days I passed in and out of consciousness. In my dreams I remembered you, my brother, our family, our village. My mind wandered through the happy times, the times before we entered the cave. Often I thought I was there. I would cry out, calling for you. And you would come.

One time I awoke calling for Mother. I found myself packed in snow with the white woman peering down at me, stroking my black hair. I closed my eyes and imagined it was Mother. It made me smile and that caused the woman to cry, breaking the illusion. I wished she would stop. How I missed you! I longed to be lost in the dreams again.

Then she coughed.

My eyes snapped open. I could see the mark of the curse on her neck.

Suddenly, I understood my fate.

* * *

I will never reemerge from the cave and see your face again, my brother. The steel hut brought me to a place before and far away, to a time of the first curse in the land of the white man.

Our people were spared the first trial, but the white man was not. The curse they gave us in the future, I give to them now, completing the circle. The star I saw last night was the first star and the last as promised by the Great Owl.

I know in a hundred years or maybe even more, I'll see you again, we'll enter the cave and begin the cycle anew. Perhaps it is I that have found the path to the Great Owl. Perhaps I am the one that started the great cycle. Somehow this warms my heart, brother, though I don't know why. Perhaps now that I know the revenge has come full circle, I can trust the White Owl again. But I'm too tired to think.

I smile, remembering you now. Wait for me, my brother. It won't be long before I join you and the Great Owl. We'll start the circle anew together.

The End

Leave a message for this story.

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"He does not know you because at the time he left you had not yet reported for training. In spite of your tender age, you are the most powerful novice to train for the council since I have been High Wizard. Your powers approach those of some who are now sitting on the council. It should be clear to you now, Brennan, why I have chosen you--you are the most skilled wizard in the Royal Palace who Mandrel would not recognize."

"It is said that a unicorn is a danger to any wizard who dabbles in dark magic," said Brennan. "Can we be sure that the raiders didn't release the unicorn in the wild, or perhaps even kill it?"

"It is true that any wizard who practices dark magic will die from the mere touch of a unicorn. But they won't kill it, for to kill a unicorn is almost impossible. And I don't think they'll release it, for fear that it might find its way back to the prince. They'll take it to the rebel stronghold, but keep it away from Mandrel."

"But how do you expect me to find it, Your Excellency? I have heard that Mandrel hides in Northwood Forest, and that covers a vast area."

"I have a plan, and if it works out, then Mandrel will find you."

Brennan had been on the road for four days. Two days earlier, he passed through the farmlands, and he was now in a barren, rocky area. The terrain was hilly; the only vegetation an occasional patch of scrub brush.

The road was sparsely traveled; he'd seen at most a score of travelers since starting on his journey, and there had been only two inns. At both inns he had posed as a stage wizard. Stage wizards were born with magic powers, but not strong enough to become council wizards. They usually ended up as performers in theaters or carnivals.

According to Sherwin, Mandrel was looking for stage wizards. To be successful, the rebels would need a team of wizards in their army. The rebel leader would be unable to recruit top class wizards--they were too few, and those who were top class aspired to be on the Royal Council.

But Mandrel was reported to have found a way to enhance the power of stage wizards by using dark magic. Sherwin suspected that at least one of the raiders was a wizard, and that a magic screen was used to hide them during the raid. If that was so, then the reports were probably true.

The sun was low in the sky when Brennan came upon a stream. It was shallow, and he could see where the road picked up on the other side. He surveyed the surrounding terrain and decided this would be an ideal spot to bed down for the night.

He dismounted, let Rainbow drink from the stream, and filled his own canteen with the cold, clear water. He had just laid out his bedroll when he heard voices. The voices seemed to be excited, and were coming from somewhere on the other side of the stream. The terrain was hilly and full of large boulders, thus denying him a good view of the area.

He mounted Rainbow and set out across the stream, and as he followed the road the voices grew louder. As he came around a large boulder, he saw the source of the voices. He was witnessing a robbery.

Five bandits had stopped the wagons of a pair of traveling merchants. The beheaded body of one of the merchants lay on the ground, and the bandits were taunting the surviving merchant for sport.

One of the bandits spotted Brennan and shouted a warning. The remaining bandits turned to face him. Brennan did not present a formidable appearance: a gangly youth with only the beginning of a beard. Dressed in attire that was neither plain nor flashy, he could have been the son of a prosperous shopkeeper or a minor official. The sword hanging at his side seemed out of place.

A large, muscular man wearing an eye patch approached and grabbed Rainbow's bridle. "Good horse," he said, "we can use him--and I'll wager there's a valuable or two in the saddlebags."

His one eye leered at Brennan. "Get down from the horse, sonny."

Brennan stayed astride Rainbow, staring straight ahead. The man, apparently the leader, faced his comrades. "Langer, come here and pull this young whelp from his horse. I think we'll have some sport with this one--before he loses his head." There were snorts and chuckles as one of the bandits ran his finger across his throat, making a gurgling sound. Another danced around holding his crotch.

As Langer approached, Brennan dismounted.

"Well now, that's a good lad. We might be a little easy on you before we whack your head off." Langer reached out to grab Brennan.

Brennan jumped back and drew his sword. He held the sword above his head, pointing it toward the heavens. "Sword be swift, strike my enemies."

At this, the bandits broke into laughter. "We've got a simpleton here," said one. "Should give us some laughs." Another bandit drew his sword. "Give us a lesson in swordplay, master swordsman." Brennan became a blur of action. He moved with lightning speed as his sword whistled through the air. Within moments, the five bandits lay dead--the expressions of amusement still on their faces.

The merchant, a bald, middle-aged man, stared gaping at him. "By The Three Demons of Darla, you can't be a wizard of the royal court--you are much too young--I'd say not yet twenty. But the way you spelled your sword... Of course! You must be using your wizardry to appear young."

Brennan was in a situation he had hoped to avoid. He had hoped to pose as a stage wizard, but his spelling of the sword had shown that he was more than that.

"I am twenty-one, and I am not a council wizard. I am Brennan, a performing stage wizard. A council wizard that I once befriended gave me this spelled sword as a gift." A wizard would know that a spelled sword could be used only by the one who spelled it, but Brennan guessed that the merchant wouldn't know that.

"Well, that explains it," the merchant said. "In my travels I have met a few stage wizards, but none could spell a sword. But let me say that I am most grateful to you, young Brennan. I am called Roland, and my partner and I were on our way home after delivering provisions to several inns when these brigands waylaid us. And where might you be going?"

"North, to Danbury Province. I hear there is a carnival in the city of Hanford that is seeking stage wizards."

"My village is near Hanford. Since we are both going north, I would be honored if you would travel with me."

"I, too, would be honored. But I am in a hurry, and I can make better time by traveling alone."

"Well, I would advise you to be wary while going through Northwood Forest," said Roland. "Mandrel and his rebels hide out there, and there is word that he captures young men such as you and forces them into his rebel army. Even someone my age is at risk."

Brennan returned to his campsite and settled down for the night. The following morning he resumed his journey, and four days later he reached the edge of Northwood Forest. The vegetation was becoming denser and the trees were growing taller.

Northwood Forest was vast, and Brennan knew that he had little chance of finding Mandrel's hiding place. He hoped that word had gotten to Mandrel that a lone stage wizard was traveling through the forest.

But even if they did find and capture him, he had no plan for retrieving the unicorn. He would have to learn where they kept the creature and how well they guarded it.

He did not try to hide or keep alert for an ambush, but kept on the open road going through the forest. On the morning of the third day in the forest, Brennan found himself surrounded by a

group of armed men. The rebels had found him.

One of them rode up to him. "State your name, your business, and where you are going."

"I am Brennan, a stage wizard, and I go to Hanford to seek employment in a carnival."

"A stage wizard? Our leader alerted us that you would be coming this way. He may have something better for you than employment in a carnival. Come with us."

They left the main road and followed a hidden trail going deeper into the forest. As they moved along the trail so overgrown with brush as to be nearly invisible, Brennan laid down mental markers that could be detected only by him. He would be able to follow those markers in pitch darkness.

After a time, they arrived at the rebel encampment, and shortly thereafter, Brennan was taken before Mandrel. Brennan bowed as he faced the man who was perhaps the most powerful wizard in the kingdom. The rebel leader was a tall and lean with long black hair and a heavy beard.

"I have been told that you claim to be a stage wizard."

"Yes, sire, that is correct."

Mandrel pointed toward one of his men. "Let me see you remove that man's hat."

Brennan held out his arm toward the man and mumbled something that sounded like a chant. The man's hat rose in the air and then fell to the ground. The other men laughed as the man retrieved his hat.

Mandrel seemed unimpressed. "Forget the theatrics. Just do as I say." He held out his closed hand. "Now, tell me what I have in my hand,"

Brennan concentrated but a moment. "It is a red feather."

Mandrel opened his hand to reveal the feather. He pointed to another of his men. "Make this man rise in the air."

Making a hat rise was one thing, but making a full grown man rise required much greater power. Brennan could have performed the feat easily, but decided it would not be wise. He knew, from watching such acts, that stage wizards could usually raise no more than a medium-sized dog. *Had he slipped up somewhere? Was Mandrel trying to trick him?*

"That, sire, is beyond my capability."

Mandrel nodded. "As I thought. You stage wizards are a weak lot. I had thought that I might one day find one with a little power."

Brennan performed several more fairly simple magic feats, and Mandrel seemed satisfied. "I can use you, Brennan. And I have found a way to strengthen your puny powers into something fairly respectable, as I have done with the others. I can't match a carnival's pay, but I can keep you fed and clothed.

"But after we claim victory over the queen, I can promise special positions to those of your kind. I hope that you will join my force voluntarily."

The way that Mandrel stressed "voluntarily" was meant to imply that things could become unpleasant for Brennan if he did not agree. But this is what he had hoped for. "I would consider it an honor to join you, sire."

"Good. Tomorrow we will start working to enhance your powers."

Brennan was assigned to a tent with the stage wizards. He was surprised that there were twelve of them. He learned from them that Mandrel could, in less than a half-day's time, increase a stage wizard's powers by at least fourfold.

A member of the group introduced himself. "I am Julian," he said, "and I am leader of this group." Julian was a short, stocky youth, about Brennan's age. "We watched your performance today. Just as you, none of us could levitate a grown man. But before the end of tomorrow you'll do

it with ease. And whatever other talents you now possess, they'll all be enhanced. After tomorrow, you'll join us in training to use those talents." Julian added proudly, "Our training methods are similar to those of The Royal Council."

After listening to the talk among the group, and asking some questions, Brennan learned that the stage wizards, even with enhanced powers, were still considerably less powerful than one born with full power, such as himself--but three or four of them working together might be formidable.

The following morning, immediately after breakfast, Brennan reported to Mandrel.

"Come with me," said the rebel leader, "and meet my little helper--without whose help I would be unable to boost your powers."

Brennan followed Mandrel into a large tent. Inside the tent was a cage, and inside the cage was the unicorn!

So that was it. Somehow Mandrel had managed to harness the power of a unicorn--a feat that even the most powerful of wizards found difficult. Even the powerful Sherwin had been only marginally successful in his efforts.

Brennan was seated in a chair near the cage. He noted that Mandrel kept his distance from the cage. Mandrel closed and sealed the tent flaps, then extinguished the lanterns. The tent was now pitch dark. Brennan adjusted his sight to night vision, while at the same time being careful not to let Mandrel know that he could see.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Mandrel drawing symbols on a board with chalk. He worked very slowly, making sure that the symbols were exactly as he wanted them. With the same care, he drew symbols in the sand with a stick. He then pulled three strange looking objects from his pockets and laid them on the ground. He kneeled and began a slow chant. As he chanted, three demonic shapes appeared, one above each object. Mandrel continued his chanting.

After more rituals and chanting, Mandrel finally rose and lit the lanterns. "Stand up and walk to the cage," he commanded. Brennan did as he was told.

"Now put your hand through the cage and grasp the unicorn's horn."

Brennan was now becoming uneasy. Mandrel had used dark magic to harness the unicorn's power. Perhaps this ritual worked only for stage wizards. On someone like Brennan, already at full power, the ritual might actually have the opposite effect. What if his power was drained from him? Or what if grasping the horn would somehow reveal that he was no mere stage wizard? Again, he wondered if Mandrel suspected him.

"You must grasp the horn now, while the spell is working. If you do not, the spell will fade. Do not try my patience."

Brennan reached through the cage and grasped the horn. It was warm, almost hot to the touch. He felt a vibration coming from the horn.

"Do not relax your grasp until you no longer feel the vibration."

Brennan finally pulled his hand from the cage, and Mandrel led him outside. He called one of his men and commanded Brennan to levitate him. Brennan complied, and pretended to be amazed when the man rose in the air.

"Levitation is a talent common to all wizards," said Mandrel. "Name one of your special talents."

"I can hide myself with a magic screen."

Mandrel led him to a group of three men. "Make yourself and these men invisible." Again, Brennan feigned surprise at being able to hide himself plus a trio of men.

"A useful talent--I have two others capable of that feat. Now go back to your tent and rejoin

your group. Starting tomorrow, they will run you through some training procedures that I have prescribed."

On his way back to the tent, Brennan still wondered whether his powers had been weakened. Mandrel had given him two simple tests, but that proved nothing. Using his normal power, he could levitate a half dozen men, and he could hide a half score with his screen. *But suppose Mandrel's ritual had worked to bring him down to the same level as the stage wizards*? He wanted to test his powers; but he dared not try while here in the encampment.

That night he formed a plan to recapture the unicorn and escape. The plan was simple enough: wait until dead of night and sneak to the unicorn's cage. Opening the cage would be no challenge. He would then find Rainbow and the three of them would leave the encampment, following the mental markers he had dropped on the trail. But before initiating his plan, he must first find a way to make sure that his powers were still intact. If something went wrong during his escape, he would need to depend on his powers.

The next day he started training. He chuckled to himself when told that his first lesson would be sword-spelling. His training started with an exhibition of spelled swordplay by two members of the group. He watched the exhibition and judged the swordplay of the participants to be superior. They could easily outmatch good, accomplished swordsmen, but were well below his own capabilities.

As he watched the exhibition, his eyes wandered to a group of rebel soldiers bringing in a captive. Brennan's eyes were drawn to the bald head of the captive--it was none other than the merchant Roland. As the group passed, Roland looked his way--and Brennan saw recognition in his eyes.

There would be no waiting to set his plan in motion now. Roland would be sure to tell Mandrel of his encounter with Brennan, and of Brennan's spell-sword. Brennan could not wait for a chance to test his powers--he could not even wait until nightfall. He must make his move now. *Well*, he thought, *now I'll find out if my powers are still intact.*

First, he had to leave the group without being noticed. He could not simply make himself invisible--in a group such as this it would certainly be noticed if he suddenly disappeared, and an alarm would go out immediately. Instead, he spelled himself into an imperceptible state--whatever he did would go unnoticed. He rose up and set out toward the unicorn's tent. No one paid attention; he now knew that he had retained his full power.

After he was far enough away from his group, he switched from imperceptible to invisible. He walked past the two men guarding the unicorn and entered the tent. He released the creature, leashed him with a rope, and made him invisible. He led the unicorn out past the guards.

His only concern now was that he might encounter Mandrel. The powerful ex-council wizard would be sure to see through any of Brennan's spells, and a novice such as Brennan--even at full power--could not hope to prevail in a battle of powers with Mandrel. Brennan must leave the encampment as soon as possible. As he hurried toward the stable where Rainbow was kept, he heard an alarm. The alarm came from the unicorn's tent--the guards must have checked and discovered the unicorn was missing.

Brennan reached the stable. He mounted Rainbow, and leading the unicorn on its leash, he set out. The unicorn slowed him down; it was swift, but not as swift as Rainbow. Speed was of utmost importance now. He had planned to be far away before Mandrel discovered his absence, but the capture of the merchant had ruined those plans. *Even now, the merchant might be telling his story to Mandrel.* He wished that he could rise up and soar away, but even with his full power he

would be unable to lift himself, Rainbow, and the unicorn. Unconsciously, he made an effort, and to his surprise, the three began to rise. There could be only one explanation: the spell of Mandrel had worked to enhance his power after all. Mandrel's spell had increased the power of stage wizards by fourfold. Was his power increased by that much? As he began to rise, he heard a voice that made his blood freeze.

"Brennan! You can't hide from me. Come back with the unicorn or I will destroy you."

Mandrel had the power to hurl thunderbolts, but Brennan hoped that the wizard would not take a chance on harming the unicorn--a powerful thunderbolt might be fatal even to a unicorn.

"I warn you. I need the unicorn, but I will destroy you both before I let you escape. Bring back the unicorn and I promise to release you unharmed."

Brennan looked back to see that Mandrel had risen and was following him. Brennan tried to increase his speed, but the added burden of the horse and the unicorn prevented him from gaining speed. Mandrel was closing the distance.

Even with his enhanced power, he wondered, would he be a match for Mandrel? Sherwin, with all his power, lacked the power to drive Mandrel from the council--he had needed help from some of his council wizards to drive Mandrel out.

"I will give you one more chance, Brennan. Release the unicorn immediately."

Brennan had no intention of releasing the unicorn. He knew that even if he did, Mandrel would not let him go free, for he knew Mandrel's hiding place. He kept going.

"I warned you, Brennan!"

Brennan had already constructed a spell-shield, although he knew that his puny shield would be of no use against a thunderbolt. He saw the flash, and expected oblivion, but to his great surprise the shield held. His enhanced power had worked to produce a stronger shield. He looked back to see the look of astonishment on Mandrel's face.

But Mandrel kept following, and Brennan guessed that the wizard was building up his power for a stronger strike.

With his enhanced power, Brennan wondered if perhaps he also had the power to send a bolt. He could lose nothing by trying. He wheeled around in midair, let his power build up a moment, and struck. The bolt was powerful, but could not destroy Mandrel's spell-shield.

Brennan saw another flash. This time he felt a tremendous shock wave--his shield had held, but barely. Before he could recover, he felt himself falling toward the ground. His powers nearly exhausted, he managed to generate just enough levitation to cushion the fall of himself and Rainbow. The unicorn easily survived the fall.

Mandrel landed a short distance away. "You fool! You thought to match powers with me?" His tone was gloating. "Now I'll have the unicorn, and I'll see that you die an unpleasant death."

Brennan, still shaken, fought to build up his powers. He would need more time to regain his full power, but even with his full, enhanced power, could he match the powerful Mandrel? He noted that the unicorn was standing about ten paces from Mandrel. An idea came to him--an idea for a strike that would require but little power, but he would need to act immediately while Mandrel was still gloating over his victory.

Brennan levitated the unicorn and hurled it--directly at Mandrel. Mandrel's eyes grew wide in horror. The evil wizard was caught by surprise. His shield had been constructed to ward off thunderbolts and the like, but not solid objects. Had he been expecting such an attack, he could have quickly devised a defensive shield. He tried to step aside, but the unicorn brushed against him as it passed. The touch produced a profusion of blinding sparks, and the evil wizard was dead before he hit the ground. The unicorn was unhurt.

Brennan turned to see that the twelve stage wizards were approaching. At full power, he did

not doubt his ability to deal with the twelve. But his struggle with Mandrel had drained him. As they approached, Brennan turned to face them.

When the group was close enough to see the body of Mandrel, they stopped, staring in amazement at the body. Julian stepped forward. "You are from The Royal Council?"

"I am."

Julian raised his hands, palms showing, and the others followed suit. "We have no quarrel with you or with the council." The twelve turned and walked away.

Brennan mounted Rainbow, and once again he levitated himself and the two animals. The three soared away toward home.

The End

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 23

"Why don't you call me Etayne?" She smiled, but he did not take it as a sign of friendliness.

Jaylin chuckled. She did know Atabyrion history. Etayne was legend, the wife of the warrior-king Chuthannhy. Every woman since her time had compared themselves to the beauty of Chuthannhy's queen. "Very well – Etayne then. Was that scene really necessary? I don't care for my friend believing I'm dead."

She shrugged. "I don't care what you think, Warnock." She said it with just enough of a mocking tone to sting. "I'm certain Espion followed you, whether you knew it or not, and I had to be sure that we would not be interrupted."

"Are you really Atabyrion? Or just naturally good at poetry?"

"Of course I'm Atabyrion." She said it in such a way that not even Jaylin could really tell if she was lying. "Did you want to sit and discuss the Tales of the Five Oaks? I rather thought we would talk about you and why you are here tonight."

"I'm beginning to wonder that as well," Jaylin answered under his breath. This was not an easy conversation for him. Every time he looked at her, he couldn't help being aware of her as a beautiful woman while also realizing that she'd baited him into a trap. "I have but two reasons. First, I want to know where Kalisha is, and I think you know."

"Jevin suspects that I took her?"

"You know Jevin better than I do. I don't know if you were involved in her disappearance or not. I'll let the facts decide that."

"And the second reason you wished to see me?"

"We weren't properly introduced at Dry Dock." Jaylin gave her a warm smile. His confidence was starting to return. He prayed his voice didn't crack or something embarrassing like that. "I've heard so much about you since I came to Minya. Not all of it flattering, I'm sure you know, but I'm curious to learn the truth."

"What you are saying then is that you didn't seek me out to join me, as I offered on Jevin's ship." Her cool gray eyes narrowed. "Well, Warnock. You took an enormously foolish risk to meet me if all you intended to do was talk, gain information from me, and then leave."

He felt his blood spark and straightened. "Then you made an enormously foolish mistake if you thought I was here to join you." He knew it wouldn't be wise to provoke her, so he added, "I figured our paths would cross eventually. I wanted to get it over with."

Her expression didn't change. A look of disdain twisted the corner of her mouth. "You are rather arrogant, Warnock. I doubt you've noticed that you are entirely at my mercy. I could kill you here and now and Jevin would never know what became of you. I'm rather disappointed in this lapse of good judgment."

"So am I to assume, then, that you intend to kill me unless I join you? That's hardly an effective way to gain loyal allies. And I don't like threats, implied or real." Her eyes narrowed, cold and fierce. He wondered whether he had provoked her too far. "Listen," he said, holding up his hands, "I didn't intend to stroll in like a garden walk, get information, and then leave with a bunch of flowers which you planted. Not only would that be rude, but you would hardly be in the position you are in now if you allowed me to do that."

"Your courage is inspiring, Warnock," she said with acid dripping from her tongue, "But you are the most sniveling, weak-willed, foolish wretch that I've ever had the pleasure of meeting." He blinked when she said those last words and the hostility and fury dropped from her face, replaced by a warm smile. It had all been feigned. The coldness and anger was gone, replaced by a calm, wry smile and a look of invitation. "I studied drama at the ampitheater and rhetoric at Crucian," she admitted with a flourish and bow. "Convincing, wasn't I?"

For once, Jaylin was speechless.

"Just a tiny thought. It is rather easy goading an Atabyrion. You should work on that."

He chuckled again, very aware of his own faults. "Yes, you unraveled me very quickly. I wonder how easy is it unravel you?" Jaylin replied, intending an innuendo.

"I suppose you'll have to discover that on your own, Jaylin. You would prefer I call you by your first name, correct?"

"I would prefer calling you by yours as well."

"Etayne is pretty, and a name I've always liked. As you know already, I have many names. But Etayne will always belong to you. How is Jevin these days?" Her voice betrayed a little sympathy, cooled embers of a lost friendship.

"I don't know him well enough to tell you, but I'd guess he still hates you."

She shrugged. "What are they saying about me in the Espion these days? It has been a while since I've had to kill one, after all."

"Oh, you know, the usual banter. You betrayed the Espion, murdered many of their members, you have a scorching case of the stiches. Just the basic, friendly chit-chat among spies."

She laughed, and so did the men around her. Jaylin was aware of them also, listening from their positions. One leaned against the far wall, his leg propped back against it. The others were near him, as if they feared he might strike out at her or try to bolt back down the fiery corridor.

"You are very clever when you want to be, Jaylin. I like that. But I doubt Jevin knows about this meeting, am I right? He is very careful about who he trusts, and he doesn't trust anyone who has met with me. You do work for him still?"

"Of course I do. That's why he brought me to Minya. You are right, he would kill me if he knew I was talking to you like this."

"Did he hire you to break our truce? Please don't say he asked you to kill me. That would be laughable, and not at all his style."

Jaylin wasn't sure if he should be offended. "Why, is that so preposterous?"

"Well, a typical assassin doesn't leave a message to her victim asking for a private meeting. It's a little too obvious."

"No, he has not asked me to go after you. At least not yet. Though I think he might be getting nervous about the company I keep."

"As he should," Etayne pointed out. "In less than a week, I've learned enough about you to know that I could never trust you. Jevin's instincts are probably screaming to send you back to Abyri. But his ambition probably clouds his judgment, and he thinks that maybe, just maybe, you might be the lucky fool he needs to finish me off. Why not send a wolf after a wolf?"

Jaylin shrugged. "You're right of course. I don't think he's keen about my friendship with the Captain of the Queen's Guard. But I never cared much about what others say about me. I determine who I associate with, no one else. My parents were a bit controlling, and it's bothered me ever since."

She nodded sympathetically and then winked. "It must have been your mother. Are you still wearing the ring? Ah, I see that you are. A pretty stone."

The tunnel shuddered and more flakes of fire wafted down the corridor behind him. The stench of cinders nearly made him gag. It felt like a tomb. "Do you really need your brigade hovering over me, Etayne? I had hoped we could speak in private."

"My whole brigade? I learned last night on Southbridge that it would take three men, if not two, to handle you. You have not had time to train in any of the Espion schools. Spanyer had you down with a technique I taught him."

"You've been watching me all this while?"

"You should be flattered. I knew on the ship that I couldn't trust you. You have Atabyrion loyalty deep in your blood, but you haven't promised it yet. It must be earned first. You remind me of someone, Jaylin. A friend that I've missed very much."

His throat went dry and he struggled to swallow. She was playing games with him, and he knew that was deadly. Especially with her. "Is that what the scene at the docks was for? Were you determining my skill. Or simply bored?"

"I told you on the docks that this was my City. You have fit in well so far. You have become familiar with some of her charms, her creaky hinges. You have friends and enemies and some who aren't sure how to deal with you. What I like the most about you is that you don't care what anyone else thinks. That is such a rare thing here."

Jaylin was curious about her ability to read him. "What happened between you and Jevin? I know the Espion is none too fond of you for leaving them, but I want to know why you did it."

"Of course you do," Etayne said. "Because you're not sure whether you fully trust Jevin, and you are not one to trust opinions you've never tested yourself. I learned what I wished from the Espion and then moved on. Jevin did not fancy that." She shrugged. "But I will warn you, Jaylin. He's learned a lot since I've known him. He will be more careful with you." She brushed her hands together. "Now, enough chatting for this evening. Down to business. You've met me, so we've fulfilled your second desire." She looked him over, "But Jevin sent you after Kalisha."

"And you know where she is," Jaylin prompted.

"Yes, I do. But I wouldn't dare spoil you the honor and pride of finding her yourself. You are very close."

"So you won't tell me?"

"Jaylin, you have nothing in the City worth trading that knowledge for. I never give important information freely."

"I'm not asking for a gift," Jaylin said, offended. "You are right. I certainly have nothing in the City worth trading. But despite what the Sovereign thinks, Minya is not the world. Name your price, and I'll decide if it's worth it."

"You'll decide?" She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Jaylin, in your present situation, you have very little that would interest me. In several months or years, if Jevin starts to trust you, then you may have information worth negotiating for."

"Then why don't I use that as credit right now," Jaylin suggested. "Take a risk, Etayne. What if I do become important to Jevin? You'd have a source already."

"He'd stab you straight through if he heard you say that! My, you are ambitious to prove yourself. Very well, here are my terms. You may not like them. I give you this information you desire about Kalisha. In return, I will come to you for a favor. It may be next week, it may be five years from now. Whatever I desire to know, you will acquire for me. If you dodge it, or even try to mislead me, I will have you killed. Those are the stakes and those are my terms. Death is always part of an honest bargain."

Jaylin considered it, but the terms went beyond his willingness to meet. He would not lie to her. It went against everything inside him to do so. Though he was disappointed, he was not entirely surprised. "Death I do not fear. Pain yes, but not death. But an open-ended favor? That would be very painful, especially one without limitations. I have no way of knowing whether or not it will be within my power to grant your request when it comes." He shook his head. "I'll find her myself."

Etayne nodded and smiled. "I would have lost respect for you if you had chosen otherwise."

Jaylin was ready to leave. "Etayne, it has been a pleasure meeting you. Unless you have objections, I will take my leave and try to find my friend." He paused. "By the way. Tell Halesowen

that he would be a much better looking man if he smiled on occasion. He's a bit of a grouch."

"I will be sure to mention it to him. Now, about leaving. It will not be that easy, I'm afraid. The Mark of Alvaron recently commissioned me to find you and bring you to him. He's rather desperate, enough so to kill one of Jevin's errands. He believes you are a threat to him and is quite willing to meet my price. So what I am saying, quite bluntly, is that I'm turning you over to him. You wouldn't expect me to miss an opportunity such as this now, would you?"

Jaylin felt his throat drop down into his stomach. He glanced around the room. The men were still in the same position. Several had cocky smiles. He realized that they were not there to protect Lady Minya. They were there to take him to the Mark of Alvaron. His pulse throbbed in his temples, and his mouth went dry.

She spoke to the four men with her. "Take Jaylin to Grey Tower and hold him there until Jorganon comes to fetch him." She turned to Jaylin and shrugged. "Business is business after all. No hard feelings I hope. It truly was a pleasure to meet you again, Jaylin."

"Don't be so quick to make an enemy of me, Etayne. The Mark will be a dead man soon. I will not, and I have a long memory."

"So do I," Etayne replied, meeting his gaze with her own. She nodded to the others. "Take him to Alvaron."

Jaylin let out a deep sigh. The sense of irony stabbed him to the quick. No wonder she was so willing to meet him! What a fool he'd been. Rather than making it difficult for her, he had offered himself up and agreed to her terms. It all made sense – the sheriffs on Southbridge. The fire in the Sutton. She was wiping clear the trail so that not even Thasos would be able to track him down in time. Fury burned inside his heart hotter than the fire consuming the Sutton. But he kept it in check, shrugged, and held out his arms.

"Very well," he said.

The tunnel rumbled behind him and he felt hot jets of air against his neck. But the tunnel hadn't collapsed yet.

As one of the men next to him reached for his arms, Jaylin shoved him aside, kicked another in the knee and lunged down the burning tunnel.

* * *

One of the men yanked Jaylin's cloak, but he managed to unclasp it and keep running. Jaylin drove into the steaming passage and all but one of Etayne's sentries scrambled after him. Several burning shards of wood had fallen through the overhead passage and blocked the way, and cinders swirled in the air. Jaylin covered his face as he trampled through the spray of fire. The tunnel roof buckled.

The Sutton collapsed as Jaylin reached another sewer box. The tunnel lurched and a blast of air as hot as a furnace door hit him from behind. The whole weight of the Sutton fell on the sewer tunnel, caving it in. He heard the muffled screams of one of his pursuers who had been trapped in the collapse. Jaylin risked a glance backward into the firestorm and saw two men clawing their way through the broken tunnels after him. Their faces glared with fury. They were only a dozen paces behind him.

Jaylin ran until his lungs longed to burst. The tunnels intersected every hundred paces into a sewer box. There they broke into three additional directions. He stopped once to try an overhead shaft. He found it to be sealed from above and realized he would need to find one that opened up into a street grate. Breathing the stench, he ran straight down the tunnel, not daring to deviate and

risk trapping himself behind a side-shaft grate. Blackness enveloped him, so he kept his arms in front to shield himself. He crossed a dozen sewer boxes, then two dozen. It was so dark he couldn't see his hands.

Glancing behind against the red glow of the fire, he saw that both of his pursuers had fallen behind. They were cautious, but there was no doubt that they were keeping up with him. He wasn't sure whether they could still see him, but he thought he had enough of a lead to try and lose them down a side passage. Two against one were better odds than four, but he knew that they had been trained by Etayne.

At the next junction, he darted down a side passage. Sweat dripped down his ribs, but he clamped his mouth to calm the noise of his breathing. A grayish light shone ahead, and he heard the noise of trickling, escaping water. His heart jumped. Behind, he heard the boot echoes stop at the sewer box.

"He stopped."

"I know. Don't hear him running. He doesn't know the tunnels though."

Jaylin walked quietly, trying not to scuff his boots on the stone or splash in the little puddles. Ahead, he saw a wide grate blocking the tunnel. Crusty sewage caked the bottom of the grate along with something rotten. The grate was solid and locked, blocking his way. The light he had seen shone from an overhead grate about five paces beyond the barrier.

"Do you hear him?"

"No, he must be walking now. Try that passage, he can't get far without making noise. I'll wait here in case he doubles back or starts running again." Their voices hissed and echoed off the round sewer tunnels. The darkness was smothering, except for the bluish gray light ahead.

Jaylin felt the solid bars. He touched around the walls and then the ceiling. Right by the grate above him was an access shaft with metal rungs leading up. It was so dark, he couldn't see it. He jumped up and caught the rungs and lifted himself up a distance of his own height before meeting an iron lid. It was heavy. The metal rasped and rattled but held firm.

Jaylin didn't want to risk any noise, so he climbed back down to the last the rung and perched in the descent shaft. He heard Etayne's man in the distance. After several minutes he heard one say, "Empty on this end. Try that way."

One of them started down his tunnel. Jaylin licked his lips and got ready to drop down. The boots scraped against the slick stone, getting closer and closer. He fidgeted and held his breath, not making a sound. Below, he saw the man reach the grate and test it.

"Nothing..."

Jaylin dropped on him.

The man let out a grunt of pain and then collapsed, his dagger clattering against the stone, and fell between the grate bars. Jaylin pounded him twice on the head to be sure he was unconscious, then reached between the bars and snatched the knife.

"Owenn!" the other guard shouted. He sprinted down the tunnel, his boots clapping on the echoing stone. Jaylin heard the boots pound closer, but he could not see the man. That also meant Etayne's man couldn't see him either. After standing, Jaylin advanced toward the man and then dropped in a half-crouch on the floor and rolled sideways into him. The man tripped over Jaylin's body and sailed overhead, landing with a thump and a curse of rage.

Jaylin made it to his feet and left the side tunnel, joining the main corridor at the sewer box. He adjusted his grip on the knife, ready to spin around and fight if his pursuer came too close. For a moment he was disoriented, and then he remembered which way he had come from and which led back to the burning Sutton. He escaped down the corridor. After an hour or so of walking, Jaylin

reached the end of the tunnel.

A dead-end.

* * *

"By the bloody Veil," Jaylin swore. A grate about fifteen feel tall, and as thick as a portcullis, stood before him. The tunnel extended beyond it, but there was another grate about fifteen feet ahead, forming a double lock. To the right, a side tunnel sloped steeply down, and horrible smells came from it. The other way, a level tunnel went away with a similar grate blocking it.

Placing his hands on his hips, he looked around. Back down the tunnel, he heard advancing steps echo dully off the round walls. They were still a distance away, but where was there to go?

"This isn't good," Jaylin muttered. His muscles ached. The shaft that sloped down was rank, probably dumping into a sewer main. He was willing to try it, but only after he'd checked the grate on the left to make sure it was locked.

As he approached, a low voice came from the blackness. "Come a step closer, and you'll get a knife in your gut. Go sleep somewhere else, friend."

"Not looking for a bed. Just a way out." Jaylin saw a wiry man stand from the inlet with a knife in his left hand. Left-handers were dangerous. He wore a cloak and barred the way.

Jaylin held up his hands. "I'm not looking for trouble. What are you doing down here?"

"I was sleeping," the man said sarcastically. The knife remained pointed at Jaylin. "How did you find your way here?"

"Blind luck," Jaylin replied. "I don't even know where I am."

"This is the Flood Tunnels. So, you found this place by accident?"

Jaylin kept his voice low, yet tried to sound friendly. "This isn't the sewers? Thank Aster. I thought I'd never get out. I came in through Sutton on Jay-Sharp. It was the only way to get out of a bad situation, if you know what I mean. I'm looking for a way out though. Do you..?"

"Yes," he snapped, interrupting. "I've been down here often enough, boy."

"Who are you?"

The man shrugged. "Call me Dragan." The knife lowered and then he stuffed it in his belt. "You don't look that dangerous," he said with a cutting sneer, "Whoever you are."

"Jaylin."

Dragan shrugged again and listened. "Still in trouble?"

"Can you show me the way out? Blindfold me if you must. I don't care why you're down here." His eyes had adjusted a little, and the morning light was starting to shine. As it brightened, Jaylin could see the man more clearly. He wore plain clothes and a light brown cloak. His face was not the kind to remember, but Jaylin looked at it closely. The lines by his eyes and his mouth, the little mole on his cheek. A wide crumpled hat covered his hair.

"Blindfolded? Too trusting, lad. Too trusting. But this is the place to be if you're in trouble. We're right underneath a main entrance to the Tier of Aster." He nodded toward the grate behind him. "Just up that shaft and you're within spitting distance of the Nasturtium."

Jaylin nodded toward the grate behind Dragan. "Does this open up inside the gates of Aster, or just outside them?"

"Outside, you idiot. Radamistus keeps all entrances and exits closed and locked, even down here. That double-locked grate back there? It's there to keep people like me from sneaking into the Tier without crossing Nasturtium or paying the silver charges."

Jaylin folded his arms. "You're an interesting man, Dragan. What I can't figure out is why you

live down here? If the sheriffs are after you too, why not live in Aster?"

"You're asking too many questions."

"What Tier are you from?"

"Lunis," Dragan lied. Jaylin recognized it, but also realized that the man was not one who trusted anyone. His hands clenched and relaxed and he started fidgeting.

"You've been inside the Tier of Aster then? I've heard it's difficult getting in."

Dragan frowned and shook his head. "Getting in is easy. The hard part is staying without swearing an oath. You just tell the Nasturtium that you want to pay your devotions to Aster at the Temple, and they'll give you a pass that is good for a few days."

"What's the best way of getting a message to someone… in the Tier of Premye?"

"No, no, no," he chuckled, shaking his head. "You're on the wrong side of the river for that. It would be easier to hire an errand in the Tier of Minya or Median than one from here."

Jaylin frowned. "I have no idea how to get to the Tier of Minya from here. And I'd really rather not have to cross Lunis and Median to get there."

Dragan looked surprised. "What are you talking about? The quickest way to Minya is through the Tier of Aster. Tell the Nasturtium you need a day's pass to Runner's Bridge. It costs a silver dyx, that's all, and you can take the main street following the wall all the way to Runner's Bridge. It'll dump you right at the gates between Median and Minya. It'll take a day to get there...no more."

"Really?" He wanted to get a message to Thasos, but wasn't sure where to contact him. If the captain thought he was dead, he might have returned to Premye for the King's Will. If not, Jaylin had no idea where to find him. But maybe the Queen would? He studied Dragan, memorizing his face again. "I think I'll take your advice, Dragan. If you'll show me how to get up to the street."

"I'd be happy to help for a price. One silver dyx."

Jaylin carefully felt his purse and withdrew a single silver coin. "That's expensive advice. Open the gate." He kept it closed in his palm.

Dragan retreated and hunched over the lock. Withdrawing a set of tools, he worked at it with the noise of little clicks and then it swung open. The morning light pooled from the shaft. Jaylin entered the grate and looked up the drainage way. A small grate covered it, and he could feel the cool air sinking on his face.

Dragan snatched the coin as Jaylin handed over the silver. "Best of luck to you, Jaylin," he said, taking the coin. A gold ring flashed on his finger. A signet ring. In the moment Jaylin noticed it, he recognized it. He should have though, for the last time he had seen a ring like that, it was on the Mark of Alvaron's fist coming toward his face.

Jaylin almost flinched, but he kept his composure, nodded to the man, and climbed up the drainage shaft. At the top, he tested the grate and it opened. He could tell that he was in an alley. Down the street, he saw a throng heading toward a huge gatehouse. The Tier of Aster.

Looking down at Dragan, he said, "One last thing. You do realize that the Mark of Alvaron wants me dead, don't you?"

Dragan's eyes were like flint. "I'm sorry friend, but I'll have to kill you now."

Jaylin was about to drop on him, but he heard the faint echo of a boot scrape below. Dragan spun around as both of Etayne's men lunged at him. The wiry man tried to kick the grate closed, but they charged too fast and threw it back open.

Dragan disappeared. A wink of color and he was gone, then a shock of cold wind rushed up the drainage shaft and hit Jaylin in the face. The icy chill cut to the bone. He remembered feeling that sort of coldness before in a root cellar in Abyri. There was something else about Dragan he hadn't noticed but should have.

A ring on his left hand thumb.

* * *

Jaylin slid the lid over the grate hole. There wasn't anything to seal it with, so he rose and ran. The wall separating the Tier of Lunis from Aster loomed above the inns and shops huddled at its base. The alley was thin and dark. He scanned the shops he passed for one that sold clothes, but he only found gypsy booths hawking necklaces, pendants, and black-iron charms. Behind, he heard the grate slide open and risked a look back. One of Etayne's servants had an ugly bruise on his face, and they both started down the street after him.

Jaylin swore and shoved through the crowd trying to get into the Tier of Aster. People grunted and shouted and hit him back, but he managed to plow his way through. He approached the gatehouse and glanced back. In the crowd, he saw Etayne's men digging through the crowd for him. An old man with a wide hat and a cane poked him in the ribs. "Look at you," he cackled, "Trying to see the Temple. I say, they're gettin' younger every day. Yes, sir. Younger every day. I done been here for fifty years, every day. Yes, sir. Praise Aster. Every day."

Jaylin felt a little tug at his belt and turned to swat a brat who was trying to steal his purse. The boy slipped away like an oiled fish. The wash of bodies, smells, and voices nearly suffocated him, but he made it to the front where fifty men wearing the black, green, and purple of Aster stood receiving each pilgrim. Each wore a saber at their side, and they interviewed the pilgrims and searched for weapons. A pass was given depending on how long they were due to stay. Jaylin remembered the dagger he had taken from one of Etayne's guard. There were two people in front of him and the line was starting to move.

"Advance!" a Nasturtium shouted.

Jaylin reached for the dagger and let it drop and it clanked on the cobblestone, drawing anxious stares from those around him. "You dropped...oh my!" someone gasped. "A knife, he dropped a knife!"

A Nasturtium looked up and Jaylin looked around, as if baffled. He stepped away from it as if it were a spider. A commotion arose, but the noise and confusion was such that no serious attention could be paid to it. The Nasturtium beckoned Jaylin to approach.

"What was that about?"

"Someone had a knife," Jaylin said, trying to look confused.

"He probably ran then. Welcome my son," the priest said with a trained unctuous smile. "What is the purpose for your visit today?"

"Pilgrimage," Jaylin replied in the most pious tone he could. "I'd like to visit the Temple."

The Nasturtium made the triangle sign of Aster. "A worthy goal. Have you come before?"

Jaylin shook his head. "No, this is my first visit to the Tier. I'm very anxious."

"Your name?"

"Jaylin." He didn't know whether the Nasturtium would be able to catch him in a lie or not. He thought it safer to be honest. It was recorded in a volume and on the pass. The Nasturtium smiled, genuinely, and stamped a three-day pass. "Since it's morning, I ordinarily would give you just a two-day, but since it's your first visit, you deserve time to visit the Tier. How much currency would you like to trade?"

"I think four dyx would be enough."

"You can always exchange more later if you desire. Ask any gatekeeper." He held out his palm and Jaylin gave him four dyx. In return, he received three dyx five nail. "There is an exchange tax,"

the Nasturtium said. He searched Jaylin for concealed weapons and then let him enter the gate.

The gate had a double portcullis, similar to the one he had seen below the streets. Glancing behind, he looked at the crowd. Etayne's men were nearly at the front. He waved to them and smiled, starting down the street where he mingled with the crowd to lose them. One main road led south, the other east. He went east and then took a side alley around a building and then joined the south road. They would be expecting him to go for Runner's Bridge.

"Buy a pilgrim's charm!" a woman's voice beckoned from an alley. "Only three nails. The finest charms in Aster!"

"Bread and fish! Bread and fish! Bread and fi--isshhh!"

"Do you need some money traded? I can set you up right away. Turn all your silver into Asterian coins for just one dyx. One dyx, you can't find a better rate in Minya!"

Jaylin felt pummeled by the offers from cripples, merchants, and beggars all flocking the main street. Preying on the pilgrims, he recognized. His chin jutting out, he stared at the vendors who hailed and assailed him and gave them little sneers if they offered anything. Seeing him to be tightfisted, the calls and propositions dulled after several hundred paces into the Tier.

His legs throbbed, but he kept walking. After stopping at a bread vendor for some breakfast, he paid for it and earned change on a dyx. The fresh fruit pasty revitalized him a little, so he pressed south toward the Temple of Aster. He remembered the island off the southern coast of Minya. He had seen it sailing in with Guyaume Reim and was impressed by the colossal size of it. Keeping alert, he walked a steady pace, hoping to lose anyone who followed. There was a constant stream of pilgrims on the road, and Jaylin knew it would be difficult discovering whether he was followed. He did stop and buy a wide-brimmed hat and a dark blue cloak to alter his appearance and hoped it would work.

By noon, he reached the inner wall of Aster. After crossing it, the traffic decreased, and he could tell that he had entered a section of the Tier where the residents lived. That deep in, there were dozens of inns and bakeries. Large apartment dwellings hunched shoulder to shoulder, separated by knife-thin alleys. Rain gutters slanted and sloped on the outside of the buildings, rusty and sagging with silt. His legs ached dreadfully and his feet had blisters. He had gone far enough and knew he needed to rest for a few hours. Hungry again, he stopped at a clean-looking shop called the Poet's Angry Frown. The name intrigued him.

The owner of the bakery was a towering man well into his sixties. He had a perpetual scowl and one eye was lazy. Tousled gray hair covered part of his head, and he had tufts of gray poking from his ears. He snarled and spoke in a rich, melodramatic voice, reading poetry to his customers while they stopped for pastries, wafers, and something to drink. Despite his owlish features, his voice was rich and compelling. He knew how to read poetry.

"Welcome, welcome my good man, come in and sit down I was just about to start another reading and you are just in time to join us I hope you like sprinkled wafers." His lungs carried enough air for three sentences at a time.

"Thank you, I'd like to sit for a while."

"You do look very exhausted young man very exhausted why back when I was your age I could hike up to the University and back in a day and hardly feel it in my feet. Sit down and join us." He had a warm comforting smile and very big feet. "My name is Nills. Come and sit and join with us old poets and mourn the days before the inkwell and clay press." His rich voice was soothing, and Jaylin took a chair. A pretty serving girl offered him food and drink, which he gladly accepted and listened as Nills started another poem. The aging poet sat on a high-backed chair, slouching lazily with a packet of paper sheaves spread on a tiny round table before him. He had long legs covered with fuzzy gray hair exposed above worn leather shoes. Sorting through the poems, scowling and

muttering, he found one and then beamed. "Oh yes, I like this one. It's called 'Autumn Plums'."

He read it in a tender, succulent voice, his words carefully enunciated and firm, sinking into the words as if he were actually eating the fruit. Jaylin sipped mead and ate the wafers. He wished Thasos were with him. After the poem, Nills farted loudly and excused himself. "Terribly sorry," he muttered, "It's the wafers they get me every time especially when I sit like this please pardon me."

Jaylin scanned the small shop. There were only a few people, a quiet crowd. A young man and woman flirted with each other in a corner table, totally ignoring the poems. One of the guests held up his mug and then stamped it on the table. "Read Skelton's latest. I've never heard you read one of Skelton's!"

"Infidel! That's blasphemy here!" Nills roared, his longs arms going wild. "Skelton's no poet he's moss on the Temple's walls, a piece of crunchy rat poop! I won't share air with a man who reads Skelton, the Premyan poet imposter. Why he's about as creative as my achy elbow here. His words drop on you like rocks not soothing rose petals." He farted, loud and sustained. "That's what I think of Skelton!"

Jaylin noticed someone throw a dart against the far wall. He chuckled, for rather than a dartboard, a piece of paper was tacked to the wall. Above it was scrawled 'Skelton's Prose.' The man who threw the dart walked up and looked at the place his dart had landed.

"What did you hit?" Nills asked with a wry smile.

"'Of'" the man replied laughing. "Write a poem about 'of' Nills."

The old owner slammed his knee and laughed. "Just my luck – I've written four about 'of' this week because of that wretched thing. Someone hit another word, please!"

"Allow me, sir," Jaylin volunteered. He was tired, but he sauntered over to the dartboard. Nills gave him a gracious nod and a crooked, warm smile. "Very well my young man fetch a dart and strike another hole in that wretched waste of paper and ink."

Jaylin plucked the dart from the wall and took several paces back. He threw it hard, and it stuck with a knocking sound. Approaching the poem, he looked to see which word he'd impaled.

"I think 'swallowed' is a better choice for a poem," Jaylin said. He glanced at the poem's author and recognized the name. Jonas Skelton, the rogue poet in exile from the Tier of Premye whose fame had even reached Atabyrion. Jaylin only remembered one of his poems, "Kisses From Minya." The work tacked to the wall was short and he glanced at the words, many of which were illegible with dart holes.

The Eve of Advent

Advent of Eve wore her exalted robes
Gracious and demure
Wh<>e moths their wings burnt
and shriveled dropped from the
flame of Konen heights
Eve creeped beneath the moths
<> affair with Lord Aster she sought
Yet spurned l<>ver Legion caught her
hands and bruised her wrists with his kisses
On Aster's rear porch.

Aster is a jealous lover

He struck wi<> steel wor<>
<>rown commands and sulfur threats
Eve embraced her lord
her sire her god on the dock
Crippled Legion pride stung
Shrank from the new lover's
wrath And the fire
(swallowed) Legion whole.

I saw the black brutal attack
Hiding behind the veranda vines

JONAS SK<>LTON

"Yes, I like 'swallowed' very much," Nills carried on, "it reminds me of a mouth trying to eat an orange whole, doesn't it. Swallowed. Swallowed. Rhymes very well with followed, even 'borrowed' does interesting things with it. Yes, I'll compose a poem about the word 'swallowed' and it will yank tears from that coddling moth Skeleton. Yes, thank you my good young man you get your next drink for free."

Jaylin read the poem again. There was something familiar about it. Legion sheriffs burning on Advent. Coming too close to the Tier…

Nills scratched his groin and then pulled out a folded, half-crumpled sheaf of parchment from his pocket. He nibbled on an wooden stylus and muttered to himself, "Swallow...swallow..shallow! Yes, shallow, follow, borrow." He scratched the paper and looked intently at it. Those around him finished their drinks and left, leaving the little bakery shop empty except for the two kissing fiercely in the corner table. Jaylin approached the wizened poet and pulled up a chair. His thoughts danced with excitement. The Eve of Advent? Ethen had said that a legion sheriff had burned the night of Advent near the Tier of Aster. But the poem made it seem like a woman was involved.

"Shallow...hallow. This is really wonderful, I've got lots of ideas." He looked up, his head rocking back and forth and his droopy eye narrowed at Jaylin. "Thank you so much for picking such a useful juicy word. Good aim."

"Nills, that coddling moth on the wall over there, the one you care so much for, when did he write that last poem? The paper looks fresh."

"Don't rub it in!" he said and scowled menacingly, "Just because I haven't published anything in a few years, doesn't mean I can't write as good as the Skeleton!"

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying. Sewer scum like that doesn't deserve to be published."

"I agree with you totally. The cock-stooler published it just a few days ago. Not many copies, but he's charging a hefty royalty for that stupid hen scratchings. I didn't buy it, mind you, I'd never do that. One of my customers brought it in, and I nearly choked when I read it you see for Skeleton is always so stuffy and filled with the pride of his genius. Every syllable is a nuance, hides something that he loves to gab about. Oh yes, he'll gab for hours to any fool sorry enough to listen to him and reveal the nuances and subtleties his words intended. What bilge, I can't stand the man."

"Oh," Jaylin shrugged, pretending to be just curious. "Not that I care, but I just read it and I don't think I understood a word of it. What was it about?"

Nills chortled with glee. "That's the point young man the point exactly I was trying to make. You eat a nice juicy plum and you want to tell someone about it, you write a poem about a plum. Simple, right? But oh no, Skeleton makes you agonize over every line wondering what he MEANT by it as if you could ever think of reading his twisted mind. Something happened up at the Temple on the Eve of Advent. Personally, I think Jonas Skelton coaxed a foolish wench onto the pier and wanted to brag about his exploits. The snob, the rake!"

Jaylin nodded sympathetically and then collected his free drink from a serving girl. The spiced mead helped restore him. "One more thing, Nills. Where's a good place to sleep around here?"

"Oh, there are gobs of inns along the main road to the Temple. The Misteyin isn't bad, neither is the Pollock. They're both about a mile down the road. Better pay for a room now while the day's still young. They get pretty crowded after they shut the Temple gates at night."

"Thank you," Jaylin said with a nod and went toward the door.

"Swallow...follow...wallow! Like a pig, wallow! This is too much, I like this word. Thanks young man come back and see us any time the wafers are really quite good aren't they?"

Jaylin paused at the door. "The best I've had in a long time. Almost as good as my mother's." He gave Nills a true smile. Something was making him giddy, and it was more than the drink and wafers. He would have to stop by the Temple and listen to the poet Skelton. "Just one more question, and I'll let you get back to your poem. Where would I find the poet imposter? Not that I want to congratulate him, mind you. I'm just curious what he was writing about. If no one asks, we'll never know where the man gets his ideas to write that kind of drudgery."

Nills chuckled. "Drudgery – the understatement of the week. Oh, you can find that lousy mouse-whiskered turtle shell up at the Temple at a place he calls Beggar's Stand. He normally sits on the south face near the cloisters with all his fawning disciples like seagull poop. When you smell the stinking pile of guano, you'll know you're there. Have a good day and stop by for darts on your way back."

Jaylin promised he would.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
Master Finch's Forge, Tier of Aster

Early in the morning, Gabe Finch awoke with a throbbing pain behind his eyes. Memories of the Cushing danced and darted away, like gnats he couldn't quite clap in his hands. He rose and went downstairs to the kitchen where he heard a dish clatter. At least he'd made it to his bed last night. He didn't exactly know how though.

Will Valeri paced in the kitchen. "Are you ready yet?" he said when Gabe staggered down the steps.

Gabe gave him a look. "You wanted me to go swimming off the pier last night, remember? Thank Aster I didn't listen to you. We'd have all drowned." He swilled a cup of watered-down mead to clear his head. His stomach rumbled from all the myristica he'd swallowed. Forsaking a morning meal, he grabbed a plain cloak and then pulled on his boots. From his cabinet shed, he withdrew a thick coil of strong packing rope and tossed it to Will. The scholar caught it and slid it over his shoulder.

"I hope we see her," Will said, scraping his nail across his forefinger.

"I'm sure we will," Gabe said, yawning, and left the forge, locking the door behind them. They walked to Old Man Hill's residence down the deserted and quiet street. Peeking inside the darkened windows at the empty cobbler's shop, Gabe saw it was still vacant. Old Man Hill would rent it out, especially to someone like Alicia. Though Gabe hated getting involved in her dilemma, he did feel a little obligated to help her.

"Getting too soft," he muttered to himself.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Let's go. Most of the Nasturtium will be at the gates and bridges. I hope no one's at the docks."

Will and Gabe approached the bridge leading to the Temple of Aster as the gates started to open. Gabe wondered why there were not as many Nasturtium guarding it, but he remembered that the Deconeus and his retinue had already left for the King's Will at Shallic Palace. That would leave even fewer priests around to interfere. Gabe kept his head low, wondering about how frigid the sea would be and if any cold-water sharks lingered near the docks. A long dagger rested in his belt beneath the cloak in case they did. The sun peeked over the mountains to the east with all the silver mines, spilling warmth across the Isle. Summer whispered in the sun's morning voice. They crossed the Temple grounds, and Gabe watched for Alicia in the cloisters but did not see her.

"Will we get in trouble?" Will whispered, rubbing his hands together. "I'll still do it, but I'd like to know."

"Doubt it," Gabe replied with a shrug.

They reached the dock gate and found it unguarded. The Nasturtium still prepared for the tidal flood of pilgrims from the main gates of the Tier and from crowded inns along the way. As the two of them climbed down the iron steps to the pier, Gabe remembered the night he had met her. Images flooded back as he gripped the metal rail. The lights dancing off the waters of Konen Dam. The audacity of the legion sheriffs. Her cries for help. He breathed it in again, felt his stomach thrill. They reached the pier and started down the dock to where Gabe had seen Alicia throw the chest. If it

was heavy enough, it would have sunk straight down.

At the edge of the dock, Gabe stripped off his cloak and boots.

Will unwound the rope coil and held onto the end firmly. "If I see any trouble, I'll yank hard." He looked around and back up the steps. "I'm nervous about this."

Gabe nodded and wrapped the end of the rope tightly around his arm. Though not a very good swimmer, Gabe knew he could handle the surge of the tide. What he needed most was to hold his breath deeply and feel with his hands. Scanning the sea toward Dry Dock, he did not see any legion sheriff vessels prowling. That was a good sign.

Taking a huge breath of air, Gabe jumped in, arms at his sides, and let himself sink. The water shocked him with cold, and he resisted the impulse to thrash out. Letting out two gulps of air bubbles, he turned and grabbed the posts that held the pier up and used them to drag himself down the depths.

Sea water swirled against his skin and hair, and he breathed out again and went deeper. Squinting as the salt water stung his eyes, he dragged himself further. The need for air cramped in his lungs, but he had only tried one column. At the base, he felt around the sludge for the box. After searching it thoroughly, he pushed off from the floor and surfaced for air.

"Find it?"

Gabe spit out water and shook his head. He moved over to the next post, took a deep breath, and went down again. After searching four posts, he wondered if the tide had stolen the chest. His arms ached with cold and fatigue, and dizziness spun through his mind. He swallowed a mouthful of sea water accidentally and nearly started retching. On the fifth post, his foot struck the jagged edge a wooden box, half-buried. His air was running out, but he wrapped the rope around it and secured it with a strong knot. Then pushing up, he surfaced with a jubilant grin.

"You found it! By the Veil, you did it!" Will helped Gabe as he climbed up a pier ladder.

The headsman and the scholar took the rope and pulled. The box was heavy, waterlogged and lodged in the sand. But together, they hauled it up to the dock. The metal frame still held it together.

"I can't wait to see her face when she sees us! You're a bear of a man, Gabe. It made me cold just watching you."

"I was tempted to tug on the rope and have you join me."

Gabe knelt and rested for a few moments, watching as the seawater drained from the seams. Then cradling the chest, he carried it with both hands while Will followed, coiling the wet rope. He wondered if Alicia had been honest with him, and he was tempted to force the chest and see if sewing materials were inside. Or bags of mystaqua.

When they reached the stairwell, he stopped and set the casket down to rest again. Doubts crowded in on him. Was he compromising himself with Radamistus by helping her? What if she wasn't intending to keep the Abjuration covenant? Suspicions came easy to Gabe, so he decided to give Alicia a chance to prove her story was true before recommending Old Man Hill's vacant shop. He had to know.

"Keep an eye on it, Will. I'm going to bring her down."

Will started fidgeting and a huge smile lit his face. "All right. I'll wait here." He started pacing.

The headsman shook his head, disgruntled, and draped the sun-warmed cloak around his wet clothes. He tugged the boots on and wiped the salty water from his dripping face. The air sizzled with heat, and by the time he reached the top steps, the chill of the sea had left his bones. So far, no Nasturtium had taken interest in them. He crossed to the cloister, and Alicia met him down the walk. She wasn't wearing her cloak and her green dress showed popped seams and dirt stains. The cloak and the gown were the only clothing she had apparently. Her gold-brown hair was freshly brushed

and hung loosely down her back in a braid.

"Master Finch," she said with a beaming smile. "You look soaked to the bone! You must be shivering. Did you find it?"

"I believe so," he replied, shrugging. "Come down the steps and see if the chest I found is yours."

She looked worriedly at the stairs. "Is it safe down there?" Her expression changed, and she smiled. "I shouldn't doubt, should I? You saved me from the legion sheriffs before."

Gabe felt flattered but tried to keep it from his face. "I'll take you down now." He gave her a serious look. "No one will drag you out of Aster, Alicia. Not even the Sovereign of Minya could." He saw a look of shock cross her face and quickly vanish. She nodded with a smile and followed him down the stairwell. She kept up, but gripped the iron rails for support. The wind tossed her hair and made her gown flutter like a parapet banner. She tried to keep the golden strands from her face but wasn't very successful.

Reaching the bottom, she looked startled to see Will Valeri waiting with the chest. His handsome face paled, and he grinned foolishly. "Hello, Al…Alicia. I'm…It's good to…I'm…"

"Alicia, this is Will Valeri, a friend of mine from the Tier of Lunis. He studies rhetoric, I believe. Though you'd never tell the way he stammers. He helped me get the chest."

Her eyes narrowed, but she greeted him with a warm smile and offered her hand. "Thank you then, Will Valeri. I am honored to meet one of Master Finch's friends. I hope we will be friends too."

"I would like that," Will said. An embarrassed smile came over his mouth. "I think the wind down here unclipped my tongue. I wanted to meet you, Alicia. Is it all right if I call you that?"

She shrugged. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"I...uh...sorry. So, is this your chest?"

She looked down at it and nodded. "Yes, I recognized it as I approached. Thank you both, very much." She folded her arms, shivering in the shadowed pier as the wind cut across the dock.

"Don't you want to check it?" Gabe suggested. "To make certain your tools are not damaged?"

She bit her lip. "I'd rather not open it here, Master Finch," she said in a low voice, pitching it so only Gabe would hear. "I'd like to inspect it, but…" she looked up the stairwell. "I'm afraid the Nasturtium will come. Do you know a place where I could...?"

"If we carried that chest across the Temple yard, it would look very conspicuous. I'd hate to attract attention unnecessarily. Why don't you open it here?"

She nodded. "You are right. But I can't...leave this in the Temple. Is there a moneylender I can trust? I can't afford to lose this."

Gabe recognized her need for secrecy. "I understand. The moneylenders can't be trusted here. They will charge you interest to keep it safe. But I can help you hide whatever is in the chest at my forge so long as it doesn't compromise me with Radamistus."

She smiled in relief. "You are so good to me. Thank you, that will be fine. Can I trust..." she nodded toward Will.

"I do. I've known him for…"

"That is enough for me then." She approached the chest and smiled at Will. Kneeling before it, she withdrew a key from a thick string in her bodice and fit it into the lock. It released easily. Lifting the lid revealed a damp, folded needle cloth. She lifted it out, unraveled it, and Gabe saw several dozen needles of various sizes pinned in the cloth. Beneath the needle cloth were fabric scissors and sixteen spools of thread, but the colors were stained and faded and she shook her head. "Useless," she sighed. Digging beneath the spools of thread, she uncovered a glittery cask of jewelry. Diamonds and sapphires and emeralds encased in both silver and gold, earrings, pendants, necklaces – a

prince's ransom. She looked at Gabe and he could see why she didn't trust very easily. One of those pieces was worth more than his entire box of dyx buried in his forge.

Who in Aster's name was she?

Will looked just as shocked. Gabe gazed at the jewelry and then at her. Knowing how the markets in Aster worked, he realized that she wouldn't be able to sell it for what it was worth, but still, she had more than enough to start any kind of business, including her own moneylender's booth if she wanted to. "I see why you don't want to leave it at the Temple. The law of Aster's tithe would certainly take most of it. I will hold these for you at my forge, if you trust me to."

She nodded. "I do trust you, Master Finch. Will you carry this box for me? I'd feel safer with it in your hands more than mine."

Gabe nodded and scooped the valuables from the cask and dumped them in a pouch beneath the folds of his cloak. The weight surprised him. Solid gold and silver, not gilt. That's what had made the chest so heavy, not the water. "Will?" Gabe asked, turning. "Would you find Jonas for me? Tell him that I'd like to talk to him later."

"At the forge or at the Temple?" He fidgeted, looking like he didn't want to go.

Gabe thought a moment. "At the forge. Tell him to come later on today. Thank you, Will."

Will wrung his hands, struggling against his disappointment. Offering a strained smile, he turned to leave. "It was a pleasure meeting you."

"I'm sure we'll see each other again," she said.

Will mounted the steps and was soon out of sight. She turned to Gabe. "I sincerely appreciate all your help, Master Finch," she said shyly. "And your discretion. I knew about Aster's tithe when I came, but when the chest was lost in the sea, I was not sure I could recover any of it if I told him."

"Please...my name is Gabe. I'd rather you called me that."

She smiled. "Thank you. I'd rather call you that too. I must start my life all over again here in Aster. It's frightening not knowing people, not knowing who to trust, but I'm hopeful as well. I don't have anything but these jewels, my needles, and your friendship. And without your friendship, I would have lost them all. Have you thought about what I could make for you? I haven't forgotten that you are to be my first customer."

"A shirt, I guess. I don't always find ones that fit very well. A nice shirt would do."

"Then I'll make you the best shirt you've ever had. Come, walk with me back to your forge. I'm nervous standing here on the pier, afraid the Nasturtium will start wondering about us."

They climbed the stairwell slowly, and Alicia followed Gabe, who carried the near-empty chest on his shoulder. When they reached the Temple grounds, Gabe asked, "Do you want to get your things? Your cloak and brushes?"

"Why? I still have to stay here."

"Actually," Gabe said and coughed nervously, "I do know someone on my street..." A wonderful smile spread over her mouth and she clasped her hands together, making him even more uncomfortable. "There's an old cobbler…I call him Old Man Hill. His shop is empty, and I know he has an extra room in the back."

"You are too good to me! On your street? How can I ever repay you, Gabe? Tell me, is his shop near yours?"

Gabe paused and then nodded.

"Wonderful!" She covered her mouth and quieted down. "We'll be neighbors then. All I need now is a suggestion on where I can sell one of the jewelry pieces. I don't plan on selling them all at once. I think I'll need around two hundred dyx to get started, pay for the rent, new bolts of cloth, thread and such."

Gabe nodded. "I can help you trade your pieces for the money. The moneylenders won't haggle as much with a headsman than they will with a woman. I have enough dyx at the forge to forward to you until I can sell a piece. There are mercers and drapers and everything you could need to start. I think you'll do fine here, Alicia." He gave her a timid smile. "The Tier of Aster is truly a safe haven. It is home to those who need one." He didn't know the reasons she came, but reasons did not matter to him. Being with her made him feel important. He liked that feeling.

She halted and looked up at him, her green eyes wide and penetrating. "You've been very generous to me," she whispered. "I just hope you know how much I appreciate it. Getting away from the Temple means a great deal to me. I'll be on my own, for the first time in a long, long while." She shuddered as another slap of wind cut between them. "I feel free, Gabe Finch. For the first time…in years. Please…please don't tell anyone I'm here."

"I won't," he promised.

Her smile was all the reward he needed.

* * *

Gabe worked hard in his forge over the following week. He hammered, seared, quenched, and forced the heavy strips of steel to conform to his will. Sparks flew, the thunder of the hammer and anvil raged like a tempest. Three crossbows took shape, in pieces and pins, small and large. Not only did he work on Dragan's order, but he had several projects of his own for Alicia. In the past, the thought of earning money on a project like the crossbow would have inflamed his greed. But it felt more like a nuisance – time spent away from helping Alicia.

At the end of another long day, he retreated to his kitchen, took a long drink of mead, and then scrubbed his face and hands. Before evening, as the heat still glimmered off the cobblestones, he changed his shirt and took the present he had made to where she lived. Old Man Hill had greeted her presence enthusiastically, and the two bonded at once. Hill was a protective man and he coddled her like he would a grandchild. Gabe smiled at that. He didn't find it difficult to believe, for she was the most charming woman he had ever met. She gave Gabe secret looks and knowing smiles, and he recognized that she was aware of him every time he came. No one had ever treated him that way. Ever.

Gabe tapped on the door, feeling awkward approaching Old Man Hill's house so often. She opened the door, needlework in hand and smiled. "You hammer in your forge like a clock. I always know when to expect you."

"Who is it?" Old Man Hill coughed from upstairs. "Dear girl, who is it?"

"It's Gabe!" she called up to him and Hill went through another coughing seizure. "Hullo… hullo there sir! Glad you could stop by today. My bowels…they're hurtin' somethin' awful today."

She shook her head. "He heard the door open," she explained. "He wants to know every time I go and return. It's like living with my father again. I've started on your shirt though," she said, going over to a table where a huge piece of deep azure wool lay in thick, pinned folds. Over the last two days, she had turned a cobblers shop into the clean workroom of a master seamstress. Gabe had helped her build the workroom, but she went and purchased all the reams of cloth and satin and carried them herself. She had tall display racks set up near the window, and after one day, she had a plain, simple gown hanging on it.

"I like the color," Gabe said, not daring to touch the cloth. He turned the small box over in his hand. "I brought something for you. But...wait, do you need any help first?"

"Ah, one thing," she replied. "Hold still while I get your measurements. I want to make sure

this fits right the first time." She fetched a measuring string and approached the giant smith. "Arms out like this," she asked, demonstrating. Chewing on his lip, Gabe obeyed. She measured his chest, the length of his arms, width of his wrists and neck. She stood behind him and even measured his back. He tingled inside, feeling her hands brush against him. Then she crouched and measured his legs too.

"Wha..?"

"Hold still. I need to keep all of your measurements, so I won't have to later when I make you some new trousers."

"But I didn't..."

"You'll need them eventually, won't you? I want to make sure I have your size, so you won't go to Mazzle Freeh's shop down the way."

Mazzle Freeh was a huge woman who had always made Gabe's clothes in the past. They never quite fit right. But that was Mazzle. Not knowing what to say, Gabe let Alicia finish without speaking. When she was through, he turned and handed her a little wooden box. "I made these for you."

Her eyebrows rose. "I should be getting you gifts," she said, "not the other way around. What have you done, Gabe Finch?" She opened the box. "Look at these. You made these?" Inside sat a slender dagger, keen and gilded with silver. There was also a tiny whistle. "Why...what are these for?"

"They're payment," he explained. "For making me the shirt."

Her brow furrowed, "No – then I won't accept them. Gabe, I owe you more than a shirt! You fought off those legion sheriffs, kept them from taking me away. Then you took me to Radamistus. You saved my treasure from the sea so I could have this place." Her voice fell and a tear pooled in her eye. "You're keeping my treasures safe in your forge, and you've come here every day to help me." She thought a moment and wiped her eyes. "I know you worked hard on these. So I'll make a bargain with you. I'll take these as a token of our friendship, not as payment for the shirt."

Gabe sighed. "Alicia, the help I've offered is not something I will accept payment for. Shirt or otherwise."

"I know that, Gabe. You have a big heart, and you did it because you are a kind man. I really... I really wasn't expecting to be treated so well in Aster." She shook her head. "I was expecting much worse, from all I'd heard. If I'd truly known you were here, I would have come here months ago. How about this then? I'm making you that shirt because I want to. I like my work, and I like sharing it. Really, I don't need the money. I enjoy doing it. You made these because you wanted to. Shall we consider them just gifts then? Not as a reward or payment?"

Gabe nodded, offering the box again.

She withdrew the knife and the whistle.

"I told you that the Tier of Aster is mostly safe, but I wanted you to have these in case you run into any trouble."

"Thank you."

"Now, the whistle should be better than the knife, since no one wants to get caught doing anything wrong here. I live close enough that I'll be able to hear it if you're in any danger, even if I'm hammering away in my forge."

She held the whistle in her fist and squeezed it. "That will be very comforting to me. Oh, and you even have a little chain with it!" She attached it around her neck and then patted it close to her heart.

"The knife is to scare away most attackers. I think someone would think twice before bothering you though. But there are men in this Tier who are from the sewers, even though Radamistus is very strict. They know they risk their lives by disobeying his rules. I happen to know that personally

because of my other duties."

"Thank you for the warning, Gabe." She sighed and wiped her eyes. "I really am grateful. Now, let me get to work on your shirt. I want you to have it before holy week begins."

"Do you need anything else?"

She thought a moment and then winced. "Just a good recommendation where to get a warm bath! I only have two gowns now, so I can wash mine now at the corner fountains. There is a tub in the back, but it's cramped and the water is cold. Are the baths in Aster safe? Or does anyone on the street have one? I'm filthy and tired of scrubbing with cold sponges."

Gabe had a large washing tub in his forge because he couldn't stand the public baths in Aster. He knew of old men who sat around in loincloths all day, so steamed and wrinkled he thought he could peel their skin away with his thumbs. He didn't know much about the women's baths, other than that they were usually filled with prostitutes with severe cases of the stitches. His own tub was large enough for himself, and he had even connected it with copper pipes and a pump so he wouldn't have to carry water in buckets. One set of copper pipes ran next to the forge fires, so the water came in warm.

What am I doing!

"Personally, Alicia," he answered, feeling his throat start to tremor and hating it, "I don't use the public baths. They're not that clean in Aster. But I have one..." he swallowed, "back at the forge." A flush rose from his chest up his neck. "It's very private," he assured her. "I mean, you wouldn't have to worry..."

"That would be wonderful," she said, nodding. "If you wouldn't mind, that is. Can I come over later? I don't want to inconvenience you – it doesn't have to be today."

"Today…today is fine," Gabe said through clenched teeth, nearly strangled by his feelings. "I'll…I'll get it ready for you." He turned to go, but she caught his arm.

"Gabe. Thank you." She blushed a little. "I hope you don't think I'm taking advantage of your hospitality."

He shook his head, "No, no! Of course not."

She smiled as he left and went back to the forge. When he entered, he shook his head and started muttering to himself. "You're losing your mind. Just because she's pretty..." He let the thought dangle and then dropped it and hurried to the washroom. He took out a rag and scrubbed the tub vigorously. She treated him like a friend, so unlike other women he'd met in his life. Why? What made her so different? Was he simply grateful that she wasn't afraid of him – his size, his reputation? His midnight walks to the Temple grounds? She knew that he was the headsman of Aster as well as a blacksmith. Yet she treated him kindly anyway.

Gabe stopped. Was he smitten with Alicia? He'd only known her since Advent. Shaking his head, he scrubbed harder and rinsed the tub out. He tested the pumps, making sure the water was warm – the forge fires usually took two weeks to cool off completely. Before long, he heard a rap on his door and hurried to answer, tossing the rag in the closet. She was a little early. Opening the door, he found Will sulking on the porch.

"Can we talk?"

Gabe stared at the scholar's forlorn expression. Will was heartsick over Alicia. It showed plainly. Gabe was grateful that he did not have a mirror to see his own countenance. "I'm sorry, Will, but I have some work to catch up with. Can we talk later?"

"Why, what are you doing? Is she here?" he whispered.

Gabe shook his head. "Not yet. I offered to let her use my bath, and I think it would make her a little uncomfortable having too many men nearby."

Will's eyes widened with shock. "By the bloody Veil of Ast…excuse my language! She'll be b...bathing? Here?" He looked at Gabe in astonishment.

"Before you get any ideas, Will..." Gabe warned, "It's not like that. Do you want her to dip her toes in the infected public baths and get the stitches? I assured her complete privacy, and that's exactly what she will get."

"I should have taken the bloody Oath, Gabe," he replied. "If I'd been here the Eve of Advent, I'd have helped knock those sheriffs on their arses, too. I think I should take the Abjuration oath and dwell in Aster more often. I never realized that all the fun was here, not in Lunis!"

Shaking his head, Gabe sighed again. "Why don't the three of us catch up a little later tonight. I'll even invite Alicia, so you can get to know her better." Will perked up at that. "So, see you at the Cushing, or the Temple...oh, you choose."

"The Cushing," Will said. "It's a nice spot. One of these nights, we should share drinks at this tavern in Lunis I know. It's called the Stillwater."

"I don't like Lunis. Tell Jonas for me. The Cushing…tonight."

"Very well," Will replied with a winsome smile. He chuckled and raised his eyebrows. "Keep your eyes and hands to yourself, remember. By the bloody Veil…"

Gabe shut the door and sagged against it. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and then went back to clean the tub. Before he'd gotten there, there was another knock at the door. It was Alicia.

"Hello." She clutched a new towel with soaps and bathing oils and also a small bundle wrapped in an evening robe. "Is Will gone?"

Gabe nodded. "He was just visiting. I didn't think you'd want an audience. Are you ready?"

Alicia nodded and followed Gabe to the back room near the forge. "It's nearly as big as the king's," she observed, staring at the tub, "or so I imagine. I suppose it would need to be. Should I start heating some water?"

"You don't need to," Gabe said, going over to the pumps. "This one is hot, this one is cold." He started cranking the hot pump and steaming water came rushing into the tub. He slid the plug into the side drain and then sat on the edge and pumped the water.

"How do you…I've never seen one like this," she said with amazement. "How does the water get warm?"

"Copper pipes," Gabe replied with a shrug. "They fill a little cistern next to the forge and the heat from the forge warms the water. I've been working the last few weeks, so the cistern is nice and hot. The pipe runs straight here."

She dipped her fingers into the water and jerked them out. "Yes, it is hot!"

Gabe switched to the cold pump and started cranking it. Cold water splashed into the hot, dulling the burn. "This line comes straight from the drinking water main, so it's clean and cold. Mix the two, and you have a warm bath."

"You made this?"

Gabe nodded and shrugged.

She shook her head. "You are an amazing man, Gabe Finch." She rubbed the edge of the tub. "You don't have to stay and pump, I can do that."

"I don't mind," Gabe replied. "Besides, it's not as easy as it looks."

"Let me see." Alicia set down the bundle and joined Gabe at the corner and grasped the cold pump handle. She strained and started it moving. The water trickled out. "Ugh, you're right." But she kept at it, and the water flowed out, but she couldn't match Gabe's pace.

When the tub was nearly filled, Gabe went to the door. "Here's a latch to secure the door. I'll

wait in the street for you to finish."

"No, this is your house. I'll not have you wait in the street for me. Besides, a door would not protect me from someone like you if your intentions were evil. Thank you for saving me from the bath houses. I'm not used to using them."

Gabe left and shut the door. He listened for a moment, and then went to the kitchen for a drink. He never heard the latch slide into place. Gabe sipped slowly from a mug of mead. The drink burned in his stomach and throat. A stronger batch. It made him a little moody, but he sat still and thought about his project for Dragan and tried not to think about her at all.

Before long, Alicia finished and emerged from the bath, wringing her hair dry with the towel. She wore a soft white nightdress, probably the one she had worn when he saw her come from the cloisters, and a night robe over it. A sweet fragrance came from the bath, and he heard the water draining through the pipes.

"That…was wonderful," she said, joining him at the kitchen table. "Even better than the pal… " she stopped herself and shook her head. He offered her the other chair and she sat, rubbing her hair with the towel. Her bright green eyes twinkled. "That was very relaxing – in fact, I almost fell asleep in there. I hope I wasn't too long."

Gabe shook his head and stared down at the cup. He poured her a drink and dusted some myristica in it. Just looking at her glistening hair and soft skin made his throat ache. *You're a fool, Gabe Finch. She would please any man in the Quaylon. She would never want someone like you.*

"Hmm," she sighed, taking a sip. "It's always nice and warm in your forge. I'm sure you never feel the winter's cold at all." She started combing out her wet hair.

Gabe nodded. "Only when I go outside, and that doesn't happen very often in the winter."

She nodded, still stroking. "I make you uncomfortable, Gabe, don't I?" she said. "I'm sorry. It's your home, and I'm making myself too comfortable. I should leave."

"No!" he said, almost too eagerly and cursed himself. "No. You can stay longer."

"Will you walk me back when I'm finished? I don't think I'd want to be seen walking the streets alone in a nightgown!"

He chuckled. "I imagine not. It is a pretty nightgown, anyway."

She smiled, but a sad look crept in her eyes. "I'm probably keeping you away from your forge. I'm sorry, Gabe. I don't want to take advantage of your friendship. It's that I'm used to feeling...protected. Lately I haven't, so I decided to find protection in the Tier of Aster. It's an unknown world to me, so many new things to get used to – news ways of doing things. This is so different from the other Tiers."

"Well, you are welcome," Gabe replied. "Jonas and Will and I are going to our favorite tavern for drinks later. Do...do you want to join us?"

She winced. "I'd like to, but I can't. I washed my dress and left it hanging there on the tub to dry. It won't be dry until tomorrow I'm sure. It's the only decent dress I have right now, until I finish the other one."

"Oh," Gabe replied, disappointed. He was about to suggest something when a loud knock came at the door. Alicia stiffened.

After patting her arm, he rose to answer it. He looked out the spyhole and saw Jonas standing there, his arms folded. He rapped again, "Gabe! Open the bloody door!"

Gabe felt like a fool, with Alicia sitting at the table, her hair dripping wet and dressed as she was. Jonas would tease him, or worse, write a new poem. He opened the door and relief flooded the poet's face.

"Is Alicia here with you? Gabe, we need to talk!"

"She's in the kitchen. What's wrong?" He let Jonas in.

Jonas glanced at Alicia and smiled fretfully. "Shut the door. And lock it."

"What is it?" Alicia asked, her voice lowering. She went pale with fear.

"I just came from the Temple of Aster," the poet explained, a little out of breath. "I made sure I wasn't followed. Listen, I've just come from the Temple – yes, I told you that already." He fumed. "I met someone there, a young fellow. He said," Jonas explained looking at Alicia, "That he knew who you were."

* * *

To Gabe, it was like thunder coming out of a clear morning sky. A tremor shook Alicia's whole body. She bit her lip and glanced at Gabe. She turned back to Jonas, her green eyes fearful. "Where is he from?"

"He said he needs to meet you," Jonas said, still looking at her. "On your terms. His name is Jaylin – you should know him, or know about him. I think he's from the Tier of Premye."

Gabe watched as her hand gripped the table and her knuckles turned hard and white. "How do you know that? Did he say as much?"

Jonas nodded vigorously. "He said the legion sheriffs and the Espion are looking for you all over the City."

"The Espion?" Gabe questioned. A sick, angry feeling bloomed inside him at seeing her so distraught. They were in Aster? Sheriffs and Espion? Impossible!

"Yes, Gabe," Jonas snapped. "The King's private assassins. His brother runs it. I've heard that Radamistus kills them on sight if any dare enter this Tier. So," the poet spoke knowingly to Alicia, "It appears your secret is out."

"How?" Alicia asked, bewildered. "How could they have found me? I have not been here long, have sent no messages. No one knew where I went except the man who sailed me here, and he didn't know anything except the silver I paid him."

Jonas shrugged and pulled at his collar. "Actually," he coughed, uncomfortable, "This lad read my last poem. Stumbled across a copy, it seems, and knew enough about what happened on the dock that night to trace it back to me. Now, Alicia, he said he's willing to meet on your terms, anywhere you'd like."

"What does he want?" Gabe demanded. He was furious. "Doesn't he realize that the Nasturtium will take him and I'll deliver him of his head?"

"He said he was here to take her back to the Tier of Premye," Jonas said and Alicia gasped with fright, "But, he said that as long as you're here voluntarily, you can stay. He needs to know why you left. He just needs to hear it from you."

Gabe frowned. "Where is he staying?"

"That's the other thing. If he were afraid of the Nasturtium, he would not have told me. He's staying at the Pollock – you remember, it's on the north road leading from the Temple to the pilgrim's gate in Lunis." Gabe nodded. "He'll be there all morning tomorrow. He said if you won't see him, he'll find you."

"I thought I was safe here," Alicia said. "They found me already. By the Veil, they found me!"

"You *are* safe here." Gabe put his hand on her shoulder. "What does he look like?"

"A little taller than me," Jonas replied. "Good looking fellow. Has a scar on his left cheek that's barely healed." He turned back to her. "He's determined to see you, Alicia. He told me he only wants to talk to you."

Alicia stared at Gabe, her eyes brimming with tears. "I'm frightened, Gabe. What should I do? I don't want them to take me back. I took the Abjuration covenant. Won't Radamistus protect me?" Her eyes blinked with horror. "But he's gone! He already left for the King's Will!"

Gabe had already realized that too. "Alicia, I told you I would protect you, as is the custom of the Tier of Aster, and I will. You have been granted sanctuary, so no one – no one! – can take you from the Tier against your will. It is up to you to meet this Jaylin fellow or not. He cannot force you to."

She wrung her hands. "But will you come with me if I do? I have to now. It seems I have no choice."

"If you wish, I'll come with you," Gabe replied, "Or wait nearby, without appearing to be your protector. But Alicia, if you want my assistance I need to know more, or I won't be able to protect you." Her shoulders sagged. "I told you your secrets were your business, and they are if you choose to keep them. But if I am to be of any help, I need to know why these people are hunting you."

She nodded, her face twisting with anguish. "I wanted so much to escape from that past. I didn't think it would have caught up with me so quickly. You don't know how dangerous it is for me...for this Tier, if word gets out that I'm here."

Gabe dropped down to one knee and looked her in the eye. "I give you my word, that if you tell me about the situation you are in, I'll stand by you."

Jonas shook his head. "You might as well tell him, lass."

"Very well." Her eyes narrowed, surging with anger. "Can I really complain? I've been the victim of your poems before, Jonas Skelton." Her face softened, and she sighed. "But as much as I thought they were in poor taste, I also appreciated them, for I realized that if I were ever in trouble, I could come to the Tier of Aster for shelter, just as you did."

Jonas looked confused but nodded with understanding. "I do understand, lass. Aster knows that I do."

"Who are you?" Gabe asked, feeling his stomach lurch.

Her head drooped, as if she were praying. She looked up and met his gaze. Her voice was timid, but truthful. "My name is Kalisha – I am...I was the king's mistress."

Thunder again.

"I see," Gabe answered, nodding. A wave of emotions swept over him. The mistress of Davin-Noll Tousann, Sovereign of Minya? The courtesan of a king? He could barely believe it. But it put everything in place. "I see."

"The entire City is hunting me because I left him. By choice. But I didn't leave a note for him or for anyone – I just left. I knew he would not want me to go, but under the circumstances, I felt I had to. He's sent the Espion then, as I suspected he would. Since the legion sheriffs are also chasing me, then the Mark of Alvaron is involved. He's the Queen's younger brother, and I know he has connections with them." She shook her head. "I don't want either of them to find me. If I can talk to this...Jaylin person, whoever he is, perhaps I can convince him not to tell them where I am."

Gabe thought and frowned. "He's probably being paid very well. It may not be easy dissuading him. If I tell the Seneschal of Aster, I can have him arrested."

"But wouldn't that infuriate the king? What if he decides to revoke the sanctuary right for the entire Tier…because of me? What would happen then?"

Gabe thought about the situation and then looked to Jonas. "What do you think, Jonas? You know scheming Premyens better than anyone. I'd suggest she meet him tomorrow, but we choose the place. We do not want him sniffing around the entire Tier."

"Where were you thinking?"

"The Cushing on Cave Row. This Jaylin fellow is still very green in Aster, so he has less

advantage and I doubt he'd have extra help. The Cushing is built like a fortress, below the street level." Gabe nodded. "Yes, that's the place I would recommend. Jonas could deliver a message to him at the Pollock and escort him there. The master of the Cushing would help us out without asking too many questions."

"I want you to come with me, Gabe," Alicia said.

He nodded and drank deeply. "This man sounds determined to track you down, and if he found Jonas, he can probably find me, and you're not too far away. So...from my thinking, you might as well meet him on your terms instead of his. Assuming he came alone. He does not have long on a pilgrim pass to visit the temple."

"Then I agree," Alicia replied. "Will you help me too then, Jonas? It was your poem which led him here and he's already met you."

The poet scratched his neck. "Oh, very well. I'll deliver the message and bring him to the Cushing. Tomorrow afternoon?"

Gabe nodded. "That gives us all morning to prepare. If you can find Will, bring him too." He turned to Alicia. "He'll be happy to help and he's the smart one." She smiled and Jonas moaned a complaint and left the forge, shutting the thick wooden door behind him. Gabe locked it.

It was quiet in the forge, but he could hear her breathing.

"I'm presuming," Gabe asked, leaning forward, "That you don't want Radamistus or the Nasturtium involved in this yet. I could speak with the Seneschal."

She shook her head vehemently. "No."

"I told you," he said, coming toward her. "I am very discreet."

"I'm grateful you are."

"I've heard vaguely of the Mark of Alvaron. I've seen him when he's come down for the King's Will. Why does he want you?"

She sighed. "He's the reason I came to Aster. He's tormented me for months, Gabe. He has some notion in his brain that the Sovereign of Minya wouldn't care if I had an affair with him. And he's tried everything short of rape to persuade me. I knew if I told Davin-Noll..." she sighed again. "But I...my fear is that the king will not live much longer."

"Should I know about any other issues or consequences of you coming here?" Gabe asked gently. "The jewels I'm hiding for you – they're worth a king's ransom."

"A king's ransom? Not our Sovereign, Gabe. The Tousanns are more wealthy than people know. They were gifts from Davin-Noll. I had a home in Median, with dozens of dresses, patterns, cloth and threads. I was a very good seamstress there...but I was willing to abandon it all behind to come here."

"That was brave of you," Gabe said, smiling.

She shook her head. "No, I did it from fear. I'm afraid." She looked at him fiercely. "Can I stay here tonight? In your forge? I...I don't trust being alone right now. Even with the whistle. I know how the Espion work, how good Jevin is at finding people. I feel safe here...with you."

Gabe patted her hand. "Yes, you can stay here." She looked relieved. He gazed into her eyes. "You believe the king's life is in danger?"

Her brow wrinkled. "It's not commonly known, Gabe, but he's been suffering with a coughing sickness for months now. I've watched his health slide. He used to be so active and engaged, but I see his candle starting to burn low. I fear…I fear the Mark will try something rash when he dies. In some circles, he's been whispering that he's the Heir of Alvaron. The next Sovereign of Minya."

Gabe considered her feelings. He didn't know whether she loved the king or not, but it wasn't a question he could really ask her. He smiled. "I'll have Will make sure Jaylin comes alone. I'll be by

your elbow the whole time, but he won't see me. Are you certain that the Mark has no ill intention against the King? Would he be patient enough to wait out the Sovereign's death?"

She looked down at her cup. "Jorganon has never been a patient man."

"But wouldn't the throne pass to Davin-Noll's son? Does Alvaron have the right to rule?"

"Davin-Noll's father usurped the throne twenty years ago, and he nearly executed the entire Alvaron family. He kept the Queen and her infant brother, Jorganon, alive. By rights of the old succession though, Jorganon could be king. Granted, twenty years has made the Tousann dynasty very strong, but I know Jorganon has considered it. I just don't believe he could accomplish it, though."

"Why?"

"He would need his sister's support, and she won't give it to him. He's too emotional, too irrational. He's only a little older than I am, and the Queen has sheltered him his whole life. But she won't let him ruin Prince Illion's chance in favor of his own. She controls Illion. She cannot control her brother. Jorganon would be virtually alone, supported only by those who truly hate Davin-Noll and the Tousann family."

"Did you know anyone at court named…Dragan?"

She thought and then shrugged. "No."

"He's a customer of mine," Gabe hedged. "I'm just curious about the assignment he has given me, that's all." A crossbow – an assassin's weapon.

"What is it?" she queried.

He frowned. "That's a secret I'll have to hide from you for a while longer. As I told you, I am discreet."

She nodded. "I'm so very tired, Gabe. And I'm nervous about tomorrow. What if I can't persuade him to keep my location a secret?"

"I'll be there with you to help persuade him if need be," he said, squeezing her hand.

Before he could pull his away, she clasped her other hand on his. "I know you'll be there for me, Gabe. I won't be scared tomorrow, because you'll be with me. Be careful of the Espion, though. They are dangerous men."

"I'm not afraid of Espion. I'm not afraid of sheriffs. If he intends to report your location, I will help hide you. Now, let me go upstairs and make sure the spare bed is okay for you."

"I can sleep down here," she insisted. "You shouldn't have to give up your bed."

"I have two. Jonas and Will stay here sometimes. There are two rooms upstairs."

He showed her his spare room and the little bed with blankets. It was small, but clean and safe. She tested it and then nodded with satisfaction.

"You are too good to me," she whispered. "I don't deserve it." Before Gabe left, she gave him a hug and a pressed little kiss on the cheek to say her thanks. It made him tingle inside. Downstairs, he arranged two tall pointed daggers and the headsman's axe and prepared to meet the one called Jaylin.

If the lad so much as twitched improperly, Gabe would take off his head.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
Cave Row, Tier of Aster

The shaded row of forges, warehouses, and taverns sloped downward. The roofs were high and slanted with shingles and gutters nearly touching overhead. Cave Row in the Tier of Aster was aptly named. Gabe and Alicia approached the dipping street of uneven cobbles and muddy grit. Beneath his thick cloak, the headsman kept two knives within easy reach. Alicia clung to his arm, peering at the shadowed stretch of buildings with a worried expression. She offered Gabe a hesitant smile and walked down with him.

"I think part of the sewers collapsed here years ago," Gabe said as the mid-morning sunlight disappeared behind them. "This part of the Tier is lower than the rest, and it's always the first to flood. But it is not easy to find if you don't know the Tier, and everyone here knows me. You'll be safe."

Alicia nodded, glancing over her shoulder. "When do you think they'll arrive?"

"It takes a little while to cross the Tier. Jonas left early on, so we can probably expect them before noonday. I thought we should get here early and make sure everything is in order."

"Thank you for coming with me," she said in a soft voice.

He patted her arm and said nothing.

The quality of the streets grew worse the farther they went into Cave Row. Burly men huddled on the corners, watching them pass. He noticed Alicia swallow and look down. The men were staring at her. Farther down, wedged between two taller buildings, a squatting shale-roofed building greeted them with a sign: *Cushing*. The street behind it was almost as high as the building's own two-story roof, so it looked as if the tavern had sunk into a turtle's shell.

Gabe nodded toward the building. "There it is. Brooks should be expecting us."

After entering, it took several moments to adjust to the dim candles sitting at the dozen or so tables. There were no windows, and the roof slanted down deeper inside. Gabe often wondered if Brooks had midgets working in the kitchen in back. The room was full of smiths and stone masons, who stared at them from beneath bushy eyebrows. A few women with wispy hair and skin wrinkled with crags wandered with thick, round trays supported on their hips.

"Are you sure it's safe here?" Alicia whispered. Her grip tightened on his arm.

"Little early to be drinkin', eh Gabe?" one of the stonemasons snorted. His hands were gray with stone dust. He was tall, lanky, with short-cropped red hair.

"Not here for a drink, Mich. Where's Brooks?"

"Right here, Gabe," the owner of the Cushing replied. He was a short man with copper-blond hair and a handsome smile. "So this is the lady Jonas and Will have been babbling about." He nodded to her. "Welcome to the Cushing, my lady. Your pretty face is welcome here. Some of these thugs look dangerous, but that man you're with has beat 'em all tugging a gypsy knot."

"Thank you, Master Brooks," Alicia said, a warm smile lighting her face.

The red-headed Mich sat up, his eyes widening with anger. "We won't let a thing happen to you here, lass. Why, I'll bust open anyone fool enough…"

"Sit back, Mich," Gabe said. He looked around the room. "We're expecting company in a short while. I would appreciate it if you'd let us alone while they're here. Brooks…the drinks are free until

we leave."

After guiding Alicia to a corner table near the bar and the kitchen, Gabe took her cloak. She wore her beautiful green and silver gown, which was bunched around her waist and adorned with a decorative trim. She smoothed the front. A large rope of gold-brown hair fell down her back. Her grass green eyes met his.

"I'll be right over at the bar," Gabe said. "If he so much as takes your hand without permission, I'll break his arm."

"I hope it won't come to that." She sat down in the chair facing the entrance of the Cushing. Her hands clenched in her lap. "I'd like a moment to think before he comes, Gabe."

"I'll leave you alone then." Gabe retreated to the bar and gave Brooks a thankful nod and dropped ten dyx on the table. What kind of man was this Jaylin fellow?

As Gabe had predicted, Jonas arrived shortly before noon. The poet's tattered vest looked beggarly next to the younger man's ordinary clothes. Jaylin had the look of a cat walking into a streetyard full of growling mongrels. He was handsome though, despite a scab on his cheekbone.

Mich grunted with disgust at the new arrival, but he didn't say anything provoking, which Gabe appreciated. In the evenings, the crowd could get rather unruly. Gabe watched Jaylin saunter into the tavern room and walk directly to Alicia's table. The plain clothes marked him from the Tier of Minya. No signet rings either. He looked her up and down and the corner of his mouth curved up in a half-smile. Sitting alone at the table, Alicia watched him with suspicion, as poised as a queen.

Jaylin glanced around and then seated himself at her table, across from her. Her eyes were scrutinizing and a little fearful. The young man leaned forward, planting his elbow on the table.

Jonas approached the table as well, but Alicia looked at him and said, "Thank you, Jonas. I'd like to talk to Jaylin alone." The poet shrugged and then retreated to a stool at the bar.

Jaylin leaned back, smiling with obvious self-confidence. "Well, Kalisha, you're a difficult woman to find. But then, I guess that was your intent."

"It obviously didn't work as well as I'd hoped, for here you are. I'd like to know who sent you, and see proof of that."

"Let me explain, then. But the proof you requested won't be forthcoming. You don't think I would have made it this far into Aster with an edict from the King's Will, do you? Now – who sent me? The Sovereign of Minya, whom I'm sure you know, asked his brother to find you. Jevin, in turn, asked me." He hesitated. "I am supposed to bring you back to the Tier of Premye when I find you. But it seems to me that you are not a prisoner here. Perhaps you can give me your reasons for not going back. Why don't we start with why you left?"

Her neck muscles tightened, but she kept control of her voice. "I don't owe anyone that information, least of all Jevin Tousann."

"But don't you feel you owe his brother, the king, an explanation? He is very worried about you."

"Are you Espion?" she asked in a half-whisper that Gabe barely heard. Her eyebrow arched.

Good, Gabe thought, congratulating her in his mind. *If he admits it, the Nasturtium will deal with him.*

"Not in the way you're thinking," Jaylin said evasively. "I've only been in Minya a brief while. I'm from Atabyrion, actually, despite my short hair. I know very little about the Espion. I was sent to find you, to discover why you left." He pitched his voice lower. "Kalisha, you are going to need to explain yourself to someone eventually. You can't just walk out on the Sovereign of Minya and expect no consequences."

She looked down at her hands. "I know nothing about you. I don't know how it is in

Atabyrion, but in Minya you scarcely trust the people you do know. There are many in Premye who wish me harm. How can I trust you? How do I know you won't go off and write a poem about it? There are so many leeches in Premye." Her eyes narrowed. "Many who seek the Sovereign's harm as well. I couldn't trust anyone there – how can I trust you now?"

"Those are fair questions. Tell me this then – what are you going to do in Aster?"

She smiled mockingly. "I'm a seamstress, Jaylin. I did well enough for Queen Keyana with my needle and thread."

"I know. I've seen your work. The dress you're wearing now is like many in your home." He tilted his head. "Have you met with Radamistus yet? I imagine I'll be meeting him soon enough, the way my luck has been going."

"Of course I have." Her voice was starting to soften.

Jaylin studied her face intently, waiting. Gabe wanted to crack his head with a hammer.

"The Deconeus was one of the first I met here. I swore the Abjuration covenant, and he promised me protection. But I doubt you will meet him soon, Jaylin. He left for the King's Will three days ago if I'm not mistaken."

The Atabyrion's smile oozed with charm. He seemed quite taken with her. "True. I know about the boat you hired to cross to the Isle. Very clever, Kalisha. But I still don't know why you left."

She shrugged. "If you don't know, then why should I tell you? As a personal favor?"

Jaylin fidgeted in the chair. "We seem to be at an impasse. I need to know why you left. If I go back to Jevin without that knowledge, then he's hired me in vain."

"A great tragedy," she said. She had a mocking look in her eyes. "Jevin not know something in Minya? It's unheard of."

"You're not making this very easy for me, are you."

Her gaze leveled at the young intruder. "I didn't know that I had to."

Gabe shielded a smile behind his hand.

"You have little reason to trust me, Kalisha, I know that. But then again, trust is cheaply bought and not as reliable as one would hope. May I remind you that if it wasn't for the poem that your friend over there wrote, I might never have found you?"

Her eyes smoldered. "Yes, thank you for reminding me of that. But you have found me, as much I may have wished otherwise. But regarding this 'impasse' – you stand everything to gain if I tell you, while I stand everything to lose. That hardly seems fair."

"Kalisha, there are a limited number of things I can do with the information. Yes, I can write a poem. But trust me, an Atabyrion corale may be superior to driveling Minyan prose, but I have never written a line of it myself." He shrugged. "None that I'd admit to, anyway."

Her eyes flamed, and he held up his hands.

"Yes, I'm an arrogant coddling moth, I know. But hear me out. I can go back and tell Jevin what you tell me, and that would be the most likely outcome, wouldn't you think?"

"Yes," she said. "That's exactly what I'd expect you would do if you truly work for him."

"However, Jevin will only know what I choose to tell him. I still don't completely trust him myself. Not yet anyway. But realistically, Kalisha – who cares?" He leaned forward, his voice low but intense. "What can Jevin or anyone else do to you while you are under the protection of Radamistus?"

"Obviously that's why I came to the Tier of Aster. It's the one place in all of Minya where they can't touch me. So why should I trust you, of all people?"

Jaylin sighed. "Kalisha, there are very few people in Minya that you can trust. I'm afraid you're going to have to accept me on faith. Even Radamistus may sell you out if Davin-Noll pays a

high enough price. Don't think it hasn't happened. I've been following your life since I arrived. Do you think I came all the way to the Tier of Aster without an idea of why you left? I've been waiting to hear you say it." His voice fell low. "I believe I know why you left. At the very least, I hope it's the reason. It's because of the Mark of Alvaron, isn't it?"

She flinched when Jaylin said the name and put her trembling hands under the table. Jaylin seemed to notice it as well, and Gabe could tell he realized he'd struck home.

"Kalisha," Jaylin said soothingly, "He is an enemy of mine. He gave me this." He motioned to the scar on his cheek. "And I would love to see him dead."

As Alicia sat trembling, Gabe quickly motioned for a serving girl to bring two drinks to their table. He whispered to her and nudged her to hurry. Jaylin's eyes were locked on Kalisha's. The serving girl approached the table with two tall cups of mead. "These are from the poet," she said, nodding toward the table where Jonas sat.

Alicia looked relieved and sipped from hers. Jaylin smelled the cup hesitantly and then took a little sip. Gabe watched him spit it back into the cup. He set it down and nodded his thanks to the serving girl, dismissing her. Kalisha had composed herself again by the time he looked at her.

"The Mark is very close to finding you. You don't know how close."

"What do you mean? The legion sheriffs?"

"No. One of his men is here in Aster, and I don't think Radamistus would like that. I think this person has followed me in. You're not the only one running from people, Kalisha. I have a lot to lose, too. Listen, the Mark wants me dead. He has paid people trying to find me. I think the Mark's man is coming regularly into Aster."

"Who is this man?"

"His name is Dragan. Maybe you know him?"

She flinched again, and blinked her eyes wide. Gabe nearly intervened, wanting to grab the Atabyrion's tunic and haul him outside for a good beating. Kalisha had to take a long sip to calm her trembling.

"You know who I'm talking about, don't you? Do you know who Dragan is? Do you know how dangerous a man like Dragan is? He's a Keeper."

She fidgeted. "I've...I've never met him, but I have heard of him. I didn't...I didn't know he worked for Jorganon."

"He knows I'm here, and I would guess he knows you are, too. Tell me what the Mark did to you, Kalisha. Maybe I can help. Believe me, if it gives me an excuse to go after that man, it would be my pleasure."

She looked at him, her eyes haunted with memories. "You don't know him like I do, Jaylin. I left there to escape this! Why did you follow me here? Why did you bring it back to me!"

"Kalisha," Jaylin said to soothe her. "Would you ever consider going back? If certain things changed? Would you go back?"

She shook her head. "Never." Tears welled up in her eyes. "I can't go back. I burned that bridge when I came here." She reached across the table and grabbed his hand. Her nails dug into him. "I'm asking this of you, Jaylin. Please don't tell them where I am! If it's money you want to keep your silence…"

"No, I don't need your money," the Atabyrion said. "I'll keep your secret. With one condition."

She brushed the tears back. "What?"

"You have to write something down for me. To give to Davin-Noll and to him only. I want you to write why you left and everything, and I mean everything that the Mark of Alvaron did to you. You sign it, date it, and I'll take it back. I promise I won't tell them where you are, but they will know

why you left. I get what I came for, and the Sovereign gets what he needs. Will you do that, Kalisha?"

She looked very hesitant, but Gabe could see she was thinking about it. "Only to Davin-Noll? Not Jevin?"

"Yes. If the king lets Jevin read it, then it will be his choice. I can't stop that. But I can make sure the king gets it first."

Gabe thought a moment and then decided he wanted to speak with Jaylin alone. He needed to alleviate his suspicions about him. If the Atabyrion were lying about his intentions, Gabe would have him killed. He believed the Nasturtium would heed his accusation.

Quickly, he scratched out a note on some paper beneath Brooks' counter. Dabbing the stylus in the ink, he did not sign it, but folded the note crisply in half, hoping the ink wouldn't smudge too much. As he approached the table, he watched Jaylin crane his neck to look up at him. Gabe felt like punching him. "Some little guy asked me to give this to you."

The Atabyrion swallowed and took the note. Unfolding it, he read through the ink smears. Gabe went back to the counter and watched from the corner of his eye. Jaylin's expression changed. He chuckled to himself and folded the note again.

Alicia looked at Jaylin, drying her eyes. "What did it say?"

"It appears that someone doesn't like me talking about them. And I think I know who it is. Anyway, that's not important right now. Do we have a deal, Kalisha?"

She looked down at her lap. "What did the letter say?"

"It doesn't matter."

"What did it say?"

He showed her the note and read aloud. "'*Walls have ears and windows have eyes, and certain names are noticed when they leave unguarded tongues. Speech should not be dangled where notice is surely given, but ere the night is over, I will find you at your inn.*'" He stuffed the note into a belt pouch. "Is it from him?"

"The Deconeus?"

When Jaylin nodded, she shrugged. "Perhaps. This Tier has ears. It would surprise you." She paused and then shook her head. "I need time to think about this, to think about what I would write." She shook her head. "This isn't the time or place to make my confessions."

"Tell me when."

"Tomorrow. If you're still alive."

He chuckled. "Oh, I'm not that easy to kill. Just ask Alvaron. Where?"

"I'll contact you at the inn you were staying at last night and tell you where to meet me." She stood. "That's all I have to say to you – for now."

Jaylin nodded in agreement. "I have to be out of the Tier tomorrow. I hope you see me before then. If not, it's been a pleasure talking with you Kalisha."

"I'm sure it has," she said and then went to the door. She stopped and whispered something to Jonas before leaving. Gabe waited. The poet followed shortly after her. Jaylin watched them go. Nudging his drink away, he took hers.

* * *

Gabe watched as Jaylin mulled over the note for a few minutes and then sat and finished the drink. He seemed to be waiting intentionally, patiently. Finally, the Atabyrion rose and left the Cushing. Mich shook his head, muttering some cruel comment about the little man who had left. Waiting a good half-hour to be discreet, Gabe left as well and searched the alley both ways. It was

empty. He returned to the forge and found Alicia standing in the heat. She folded her arms, looking a little pink under the sun. Brightening as he came into view, she gave him a smile.

"I feel like a tree that has lost all its leaves in the wind," she said. "I know I must look awful."

He shook his head and let her in. "Let's talk, Alicia – or Kalisha. Which do you prefer?"

"I'm Alicia now," she said with a firmness in her voice and entered the shaded forge. They went to the table and she dropped into a chair. "Thank you for being there, Gabe. I don't think I would have made it through that alone. As you saw, I'm not very good at confrontations."

Gabe smiled and sat down. "I had the drinks sent to you, to give you a little reprieve from his assault. He's direct and persuasive." Gabe wondered how much composure he would keep with someone like Gabe standing over him with an axe. Some of them blubbered rather fiercely.

"It felt like he was stripping me naked right there in front of everyone." She sighed and shook her head. "I didn't like that part."

Gabe raised his eyebrows and then cleared his head. "Are you going to write that note?"

"I really wanted your advice first. What I know can hurt a lot of people. I came here to avoid that – to avoid hurting anyone too much. Now Jaylin wants me to do just that. Should I? Am I really safe in Aster? Safe from the Espion or the Mark of Alvaron? If I'm not, I won't say anything. I'll hire a ship and sail to another country."

Gabe took her hand. "What Jaylin said about trust is true. I want you to believe that you can trust me. But if I'm going to help you, you need to share with me this information. I will guard your secret, Alicia. But I can't help you or answer your question without knowing more."

She looked at him hesitantly, biting her lip. "You've been helping me since I came here, Gabe. I know you hold a high position with Radamistus. Did he send you to learn this from me?"

"Absolutely no! I'm my own man, and I follow my own counsel. You're not an assignment. Everything I've done has been voluntary."

She looked very relieved. "You have honest eyes, Gabe Finch. You can usually tell that about people." Her other hand rested on his. "I'll expose my soul to you then. This has been crushing me for months, without anyone I could share it with. By knowing this, I'm sure you are putting yourself in the same danger I am in – but you're so much stronger than I. By both of us knowing, if I die, someone else will have the information." She swallowed. "Are you sure you want this?"

He nodded, stone-faced and adamant.

She didn't let his hands go. "I was just a seamstress in Median five years ago. I've been good since I was very young, and I became the envy of every seamstress who served the Tier of Premye. Then I met the Mark of Alvaron, Jorganon – he was twenty-four at the time, I was twenty-two. He took a…special interest in me and my designs." She bit her lip and looked away. "I became his lover because…well, he's handsome…and charming when he wants to be, and I thought he would help me get noticed at court. He did. He introduced me to his sister, the Queen, and she took me on as her personal seamstress. Jorganon and I didn't see much of each other after that, but he always felt I owed my success to him, not to my own work. His charm is really only a disguise. He's a cruel man, Gabe."

"Go on."

"The king, Davin-Noll, was also impressed by my work when he saw the new fashions the Queen and their daughter wore. Then he took an interest in me. He was very friendly…very tender. It did not happen quickly, but it did happen. I fell in love with him. Three years ago, I became his mistress. I stopped seeing Jorganon after that, refusing to answer his letters or to meet with him privately. He was furious, declared that the king had stolen me from him. That's not how it was. I never loved Jorganon. In all truth, he frightened me."

"How?"

She seemed to wrestle with some dark memories. "He has very violent moods. I know he's enslaved by mystaqua. He is handsome and knows it, and as I said, he can be very charming when he wants to be. But he can get very ugly and violent. I thought being the King's mistress would protect me, but it just made him more anxious to have me back. He threatened to abduct me, to rape me, to kill me."

"In letters?" Gabe asked, furious. His anger towards Jaylin had cooled. If he truly wanted Alvaron's harm.

"No, in whispers. He said the king was getting sick, and that when he died, I'd be his again." She shook her head and shuddered. "But I'd decided never to be with him again. One night, while I was expecting the king in his bedchamber, Jorganon came in through a secret passage and tried to force me. I told him I would scream if he touched me, but he mocked and said he would denounce me – would say that we'd been having an affair while I had been the king's mistress. Queen Keyana would support him, for she was angry with me for what I'd become. I knew Davin-Noll would be furious, would suspect me too." She sniffled and shook her head. "I do have a reputation for being too friendly with people. But it's my nature, Gabe. People just take it the wrong way."

"What happened?" Gabe demanded, his anger growing.

"I tried to convince him to leave, that Davin-Noll would kill him if he saw us together. He started taking off his clothes, and then we heard the king coming. He escaped out the secret passage, and I was a wreck when the king came. I couldn't let on that Jorganon had been there, or he'd never have believed me. Davin-Noll is kind, but he's a very jealous man. So after that night, about a month ago, I decided to escape the Tier of Premye. I wanted to go to the one place Jorganon and the Sovereign didn't have power. Here. I knew my home was being watched by the legion sheriffs, under Jorganon's orders, probably waiting for me to come home so he could get me alone. So I took my jewels and escaped out the window without staying the night. I slept at a friend's home the first night and traveled in disguise to the Tier of Minya. I hired a merchant ship to sail me to Aster during Advent. Jorganon was searching for me everywhere. And it looks like he is still. I can't go back there to that life, Gabe. Not ever again. Even if Jorganon were punished."

Gabe let out his breath and felt mottled rage inside his heart. "I know it wasn't easy, but thank you for telling me."

"I know I can trust you," she said, smiling. "Now, if I tell Jaylin this, Davin-Noll will probably kill Jorganon. My actions prove my innocence. But if Jorganon dies, the Queen will hate me even more. She never forgets a wrong done to her, and I'm already guilty in her eyes by being her husband's mistress. So, that is why I decided to leave that life behind me. That way, Jorganon wouldn't fall and I'd win back a little of the Queen's favor. At least enough that she might forget about me. I know I've hurt Davin-Noll, but I also know he's dying. If I waited until he was dead to leave," she shook her head. "No, I couldn't wait for that."

"Did you tell any of this to Radamistus?"

Her face darkened. "I told him who I was. I couldn't gamble that one of his servants would recognize me. I did tell him I was escaping the king's displeasure, that he was going to dismiss me." She shuddered. "He offered me a...position in his manor house…but I declined it. I came here to be a seamstress, not his consort. I had...I was starting to worry about staying too long at the Temple. He was looking at me...in a way I am very familiar with." She squeezed his hand. "That's why I'm so grateful you helped me claim the chest I had brought, and also for setting me up near you. I'm not here to sell myself, Gabe. To anyone. You can tell Will that I'm not married – but that he's wasting his time with me. He could do a lot better than someone like me." Tears came quietly from her eyes, and

she hung her head and let them fall.

Gabe squeezed her hand. He had never been so close to a woman before or spoken so intimately. His heart cringed for her.

She wiped the tears away and then looked up at him, embarrassed. "So, what advice can you give me? I came here to escape incriminating Jorganon. It sounds like Jaylin wants me to help divulge his actions publicly. It would defeat the purpose of coming here, though. I'd still make a deeper enemy with the Queen." She shook her head. "I am so bone-sick weary of this. What should I do?"

"My first advice is to remind you to be very careful with Radamistus. He's a fair man, but you want to stay in his good graces now. It is his power that gives you safety here. I would advise against breaking the sanctuary oath – ever."

"Of course. But what about Jaylin? What should I do?"

Gabe looked at Alicia seriously. "I want you to wait until after I meet with him. Then I will give my final advice."

"Are you going to see him tonight?"

He shook his head and rose. "No. Right now."

* * *

Jaylin wandered lazily toward the Temple grounds. He doubted Jonas would be there, but that didn't matter much to him. He recognized landmarks easily – the chubby baker with pastry smears on his apron, a splintered sign hanging from iron rings, even a dog still asleep in an alley. Maybe the mutt was dead.

Jaylin wandered out of Cave Row and discovered the second bridge leading to the Temple. The summer day shone brightly, and he sweltered beneath the blue cloak, though the wide hat shielded him from the glare. Everything glistened with colors, and the cobblestones in the distance shimmered like simmering stew. He showed his pass again at the bridge to the Nasturtium, and they let him enter. He wondered how they stayed cool under the dark religious robes. Actually, he didn't want to know.

A soothing ocean breeze caressed the Isle of Aster, and Jaylin explored the grounds again. On the north face, just across from the Deconeus' sprawling mansion, he saw a black iron rail leading down to the docks. A little veranda perched there and people gathered around it, talking about how the poet Jonas Skelton had sat there watching everything he had written about the Eve of Advent. Jaylin listened in, watching the Semn spill into the ocean and engulf the shores of the Steene. It amazed him to be standing there, watching as ships approached the harbors of the Tier of Minya. Not long ago, he had stared at the Isle of Aster from one of them. The scar on his cheek itched and flecks of scab came away when he scratched it.

While walking the grounds, he watched the ocean and felt the hint of a spray on his face. Seagulls squealed overhead in lazy circles. The ocean's expanse stretched out to Atabyrion and farther. He returned to the veranda and watched the ships come in to Dry Dock again. From the distance, he couldn't hear the commotion, but he could smell it faintly in the wind.

Someone approached him. He turned and saw a huge man walking toward him, several hundred pounds of solid muscle bulking him. He seemed very familiar, and then Jaylin recognized the reddish-brown hair. He was the bartender at the Cushing who had handed him the note. The giant of a man sat down at the bench next to his. He had wise blue eyes and a thoughtful, pensive look.

"Hello again," Jaylin greeted, feeling a little intimidated.

"Good afternoon." His voice was husky and deep. "My name is Gabe Finch."

"I'm Jaylin Warnock from Atabyrion. What can I help you with? If you're angry I didn't finish the drink you gave me, I apologize."

"I'm a blacksmith, not a bartender."

"I believe you," Jaylin said, sizing up his arms. Beneath the man's ordinary gray cloak, he noticed two daggers. "What can I do for you?"

The blacksmith's gaze was serious. "I'd like to know about a man called Dragan. You mentioned him in the Cushing."

Jaylin stretched out his legs and smiled at the smith. He was fairly confident of his safety on the Temple grounds. The man's size was suddenly irrelevant. "Was that note from you?"

The smith nodded. "It was. I overheard your conversation."

Jaylin rubbed his mouth. "You could get in trouble carrying those daggers, you know."

"I don't think so. I'm also one of the Headsmen of Aster and work for Radamistus. It's an office in the Tier of Aster, and I have a permit and the trust to carry weapons." He smiled, not entirely a friendly one. "Tell me what you know about Dragan, please."

Jaylin swallowed.

"I know very little myself, other than the fact that I think he wants to kill me. What is your interest in him?"

Gabe paused. "Radamistus knows he is doing business here in Aster, and it is very important we find out what business a Keeper has in this Tier. He assigned me to report to him about it. When I heard you mention his name, I naturally took an interest. Why does he want to kill you?"

"Because I recognized the signet of the man who hired him. He wears the ring of the Mark of Alvaron."

Gabe frowned and thought a moment. "When did you see Dragan last?"

"On my way to this Tier." Jaylin studied his face and saw that he was thinking, putting pieces together. "What do you know about that lady I was speaking with?"

"I know who she is probably better than you do. Where did you first meet Dragan? What was the context?"

Jaylin pondered the headsman of Aster. He was a very guarded and wary man, but he didn't look like the type who lied easily. However, Jaylin also had the impression that whatever he told him would probably reach Radamistus' ears.

"I met him just outside the main entrance to the Tier of Aster. His employer is not a friend of mine, so Dragan naturally isn't either. I don't know what he was doing there." He paused. "I met him by chance, and it was luck that led me to the knowledge of who he worked for. But I would guess that the Mark is up to something, and I would really like to know what. Now, Gabe, tell me. What do you know about Dragan?"

Gabe rose, and his shadow smothered Jaylin. "Let's conduct the rest of this interview down on the docks," he suggested. "The noise of the ocean will keep unwanted ears away."

Jaylin was nervous. The other bystanders had wandered off, leaving the two of them alone. He nodded and followed Gabe down the iron-railed stairwell. The spray of the ocean grazed his cheeks, tasting salty on his tongue. The steps were slick, but he kept his balance and followed Gabe swiftly down.

On the dock, the headsman of Aster turned and scrutinized him.

For an instant, a moment of pure panic, Jaylin though the man would attack him.

"I know Dragan," Gabe said in a low voice, "because he commissioned me to work for him."

"He did? He knew who you were?"

Gabe nodded. "He came to find a blacksmith, and I am very good at what I do. Why do you think Dragan would come to the Tier of Aster to hire a blacksmith?"

"Aster is the one place where he could be sure the Espion wasn't watching. What did he hire you to do?"

"Why would the Mark need a special item constructed, forged of the strongest metal in the hottest forge in Minya?"

"What kind of item?"

"I'm sorry that I can't come outright with that information. I do keep a strict policy of confidentiality for my clients, but I have questions about Dragan's intentions. So does Radamistus. Being acquainted somewhat with the Espion, why would Dragan need something that works very well...at a distance?"

"The Mark wants someone dead. And with the King's Will in session...when does Dragan want it by?"

Gabe frowned. "He wants it as quickly as I can make it, but I did not commit to anything sooner than three months."

"Three months," Jaylin mused. "The King's Will meets once every season."

Gabe rubbed his mouth. "So, you believe the Mark of Alvaron is planning a murder?"

"Oh, the Mark is not above murder," Jaylin said. "Believe me. He killed one of Prince Jevin's errands – one that I had sent to him with an important message. He has also tried to kill me." He motioned to his scar. "And he is after the Captain of the Queen's guard. He may even want to kill Jevin." He paused, his mind whirling. "When did Dragan contact you?"

"Very recently. Before Alicia came to the Tier of Aster."

"Things have changed since then," Jaylin muttered. "He might be moving up his plans. I've only been in Minya a short while. Has the King's Will already started?"

Gabe nodded. "Soon. Radamistus left two days ago. I believe it officially starts tomorrow and lasts for three or four days."

"I need to get back to Premye. Gabe, can you get a message to Kalisha right now? I need you to tell her something for me."

"She has set up a shop as a seamstress. That's all you need know right now, unless she wants you to know more than that."

"Then tell her I'm leaving first thing in the morning. If she wants me, she needs to come to my inn tonight. I have found out everything I need to know, but I'd like to give her the chance to share her side of the story. And if it incriminates the Mark of Alvaron, which it does, we can use it against him. You know what's going on, Gabe. Convince her! There is enough evidence right now to incriminate Alvaron in a great many things. Her witness would help cinch it with Davin-Noll. He won't get away with what he's done to her."

Gabe nodded. "I will approach her about it, Jaylin. Believe it when I say that my advice to her will influence her decision whether to help you or not."

"I believe you. As I said, I have enough now to bring on the Mark's downfall. Timing is crucial, though, and I need to get to Shallic Palace as soon as possible. I could use her help, her witness. Tell her that, Gabe. I didn't come down here to hurt her." He sized up the blacksmith once more. "I know you'd kill me if I tried."

"I almost did," Gabe said. "I'm going to encourage her to write the note for you, but it's her choice in the end. I know where to reach you."

There was nothing left to say.

* * *

Before the first Nasturtium watch came to the inn, Kalisha and Gabe Finch entered the Pollock. From Jaylin's vantage at a nearby table, she looked nervous and timid, dwarfed by the man next to her. He had a tender look in his eye and motioned for her to enter first and then directed her to Jaylin's table. He nodded to them, inviting them over.

Kalisha approached, wrapped in a cloak, and stared at him. "Maybe I shouldn't be doing this, but I am. Can we use your room? I don't want anyone else to hear."

"Absolutely," Jaylin said. "Follow me." Without saying another word, he escorted Kalisha and Gabe up to the small room he had slept in the night before. The room was cramped, with only a bed and one chair. A little oil lamp sat on the table, and Jaylin quickly lit it. Gabe barely fit through the doorframe, and he closed it behind him and leaned back against it. Jaylin motioned to the bed, and Kalisha seated herself. The lighting in the room was subdued, giving her hair a soft glow. Jaylin smirked. Down to the little mole on the corner of her jaw, Jonas Broan had described her perfectly. Even the eyes as green as fresh oak leaves.

Kalisha looked at him and then handed him a folded note from her cloak. "I did not seal it," she said, "because I wanted you to read it first. I addressed it to Davin-Noll, and signed it one of the lovenames he gave me. That way, he'll know for certain it is from me."

"May I?" Jaylin asked, taking the note.

She shook her head. "I'd rather you didn't read it now, it would make me feel foolish. But I will tell you what it says and what I wrote. It will harm the Mark of Alvaron."

"I would hope so." He sat down on the chair and leaned forward intently. "What did he do to you in Premye?"

Her eyelashes fluttered down, and then she looked at him fiercely. "It was earlier than Premye. Much earlier."

* * *

"Why didn't you tell the king?" Jaylin asked in a soft voice.

"He may be powerful in Minya, but his reign is almost guttered out. When it does, there will be a battle for the throne. The Queen is very powerful, Jaylin. She does not share affection for me now that I've warmed her husband's bed." She said the last words in a self-mocking tone. "If I caused her brother to fall, I knew she would kill me when Davin-Noll died." She sighed. "I grew so weary of these intrigues. And so I chose to injure the king by leaving him, without a word. It pains my heart to think of how much I hurt him, but I really did not feel I had another choice. I left. I will never go back there again." She glanced over at Gabe. "He advised me to share this with you. If Jorganon must pay for his crimes, then my words will not be the only ones against him. Is that right?"

"That is right, Kalisha." Jaylin leaned forward, smiling. "What I am hoping for is that this is enough to get the Sovereign of Minya personally involved. There is plenty more to incriminate the Mark. I just hope it works."

"I hope you are right about this. I will warn you, though. If you bring him down, you will make an enemy of Queen Keyana yourself."

"Perhaps. Though I think I've covered that outcome already."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know Thasos Walkelin, captain of the Queen's Guard?"

She nodded. "He's a very nice man. And he's from..."

"Atabyrion. He happens to be one of my only true friends in Minya right now. I think he'll help keep me out of harm's way with her."

"If anyone could, it would be Thasos," she said, nodding. "He was always pleasant to me."

"Now, you took a risk trusting me, and I know it wasn't easy. But thank you. Now let me do something to show that your trust is well-placed." He took off the blue sapphire ring that Jevin gave him. "Take this. If you ever need help, get this ring back to me. I will know it's from you and that you need me. I won't be inconspicuous for long, if I can keep myself alive. This just may become useful for you. Keep hidden and keep safe here in Aster, and everything will work out." He gave her a wink.

She accepted the ring. "It's pretty, Jaylin. Thank you."

Jaylin also turned to Gabe. "Thank you, master headsman, for your words on my behalf. Thanks to you, there will be a need for a new Mark of Alvaron. The position was getting a little stale anyway." He paused, rubbing his chin. "I need to get to the Tier of Minya."

"Runner's Bridge," Gabe said, "leads from the Tier of Aster directly to the Tier of Median, just above the north wall. It is easy to leave Aster that way, but difficult to enter in again. The sheriffs control the gate, not the Nasturtium. Just take the main road east and you'll get there well before sunset."

Jaylin escorted Gabe and Kalisha down to the tavern room and watched them go. He ordered a tall goblet of spiced mead and sipped it slowly. Reaching into his shirt, he withdrew Kalisha's note to Davin-Noll. He glimpsed the workings of her thoughts expressed by a quavering writing stylus and ink. It was a long letter, one that whispered soothing memories but also made it clear that they would never see each other again. Her words were planks, nails, and rigging, building a gallows for Jorganon. It recorded three years of abuse, fear, and the slow destruction of her spirit, forcing her to abandon the world she had known and loved to live forever in exile in the Tier of Aster. He felt sorry for her – sorry that she was the kind of woman who fled her problems instead of facing them. But then again, she was Minyan, not Atabyrion.

He swallowed the last of the mead and went to bed. Tomorrow, he would start carrying the roped chain that would drag Alvaron down.

To be concluded in the May 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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formations had seemed exotic to the point of bizarre. Here were the grandfathers of all thunderheads. They billowed hundreds of times higher than they ever could on any mere planet. The anviling crowns of these super-storms hung so distant that their color resided more in peach than in white. The most remote were red, hued the way the sun reddened through the thicker atmosphere and dust of twilight. Considering the scale of Polyphemus, Reeber guessed that some of these storms might be as large as planets. He had been able see the far away flash of lightning. They were bright even against full daylight. He had listened for answering rumbles of thunder but could hear none. They must be lost in the constant, lulling roar of the oceans.

A primary, bright star shone overhead. Apparently it served as the *sun* for this portion of Polyphemus' interior surface. Even at noonday, other stars could be seen as well. These appeared more distant, but close enough to be seen in daylight. They had shone above him at regular, geometric intervals, growing fainter with distance.

The horizon never resolved itself, but extended far up into the sky. It had looked, even in daylight, like a kind of checkerboard of light and dark patches made of sea and land. Reeber had quickly concluded that all the lighter points of the checkerboard must be sections of distant, livable terrain where other suns shone. The dark patches must have been areas where night reigned. The pattern of light and dark had blended among the clouds. It grew ever more busy and dense until a quarter-way up the sky it seemed a texture of salt and pepper. Just before losing any semblance of light and dark, it merged finally with the color of the sky--perhaps accounted for some of it.

Reeber had squinted at the local sun. If he averted his eyes he could just barely see a massive, opaque hemisphere, the edge of which almost cut into the disk of the sun. So *that* had been how day and night was achieved. The hemisphere apparently rotated about the stationary star so that there was roughly twelve hours of light and twelve hours of darkness, thus maintaining a livable habitat on the surface beneath.

Reeber had marveled at all of this. When he had pondered upon the task of constructing so massive a place as Polyphemus, his mind had simply refused to consider it even remotely possible. Here was a super world. Its artificial surface was equipped with an ecological system as stable as any single planet's!

Still no calls had come.

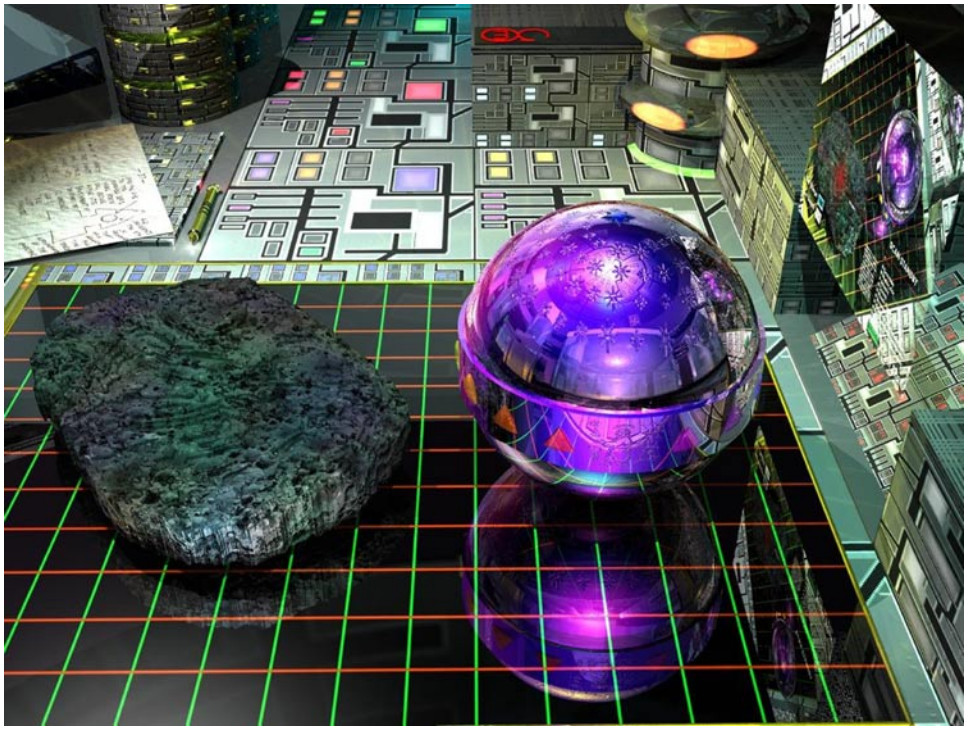
Reeber had walked back inside and dialed a breakfast from the synth cafe in his kitchenette. He had sat down to eat. The food must have tasted all right, for he had finished it without enjoying it much. He hadn't even noticed it.

Why didn't they call?! Half an hour later, Reeber had decided he would use the time to re-open his notes and writings on the Vanguards--his life's work on the debunking of the myths.

Everything would have to be reexamined.

He had gone to the safe and opened it. Before pulling out the chips that contained all his writings, he had paused to look at the Mhyrn artifacts. Powerful feelings and unresolved intuitions about them rushed over him. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before. Here the artifacts had rested in the quiet, dark compartments of the safe. But the objects themselves seemed anything but dark. They had almost seemed to glow with some inner illumination of pale, dim lavender. In all the times he had looked upon these ancient objects, he could never remember having seen anything quite like this before.

Presumably, the Coss sphere was made of solid pluridium (the material, Reeber had reminded himself, that composed the Vanguards). Science had not *begun* to understand the full properties of that incredible substance. The metal itself could be forged only in hyperspace. Little wonder it had power to interact with the fabric of time, energy and other forces of nature. And how was it that



pluridium occurred naturally on Mhyrn, and nowhere else in the galaxy, perhaps the universe? It was one of the great mysteries of modern science. It stirred within Reeber a great storm of excitement and hope about the powers promised by these objects. He looked at the Coss stone with new appreciation. It was made of volcanic rock. But how could igneous rock make a Vanguard jump the way the Cygnus had?

"Hmm," Reeber had grumbled, brows furrowed. Here was an intriguing mystery that hinted at some fantastic, alien science. It was apparently a science sophisticated and subtle beyond anything humanity could comprehend--a science so incredible that it seemed more magic than science. But what excited him now was the prospect that even greater secrets and greater powers might yet lie hidden within the artifacts—undiscovered--waiting. He had to fight to avert an anxious struggle against that wonderment. At the same time he inwardly cursed anew the fact that no one had come to get him! No one seemed in the slightest interested in investigating the staggering secrets the artifacts promised.

Why hadn't they come?!

Reeber had wrenched his attention away from the relics and gathered the information chips he had first opened the safe to work on. He put them in the viewer.

As he read, his own words depressed him. He had wasted so much time and energy running down the wrong paths. But what was worse, he had discovered interviews that he had doctored. He was appalled! How *could* he . . . then he remembered. He had quite innocently *massaged* the data to fit his pet theories. He had gone back after gathering further information and adjusted earlier findings.

No--not he--not Clement Reeber, tireless searcher for truth! What had possessed him? All these years he had been certain he had an unflinching, open mind. But there it was--the logged alterations in his own voice. He had shifted about in his seat uneasily. So he *was* guilty. Unfortunately, massaging data *was* done in scientific research. It was probably done more frequently than anyone in the scientific community cared to admit. Everyone knew it was done. No one talked about it because it was always justified as *necessary* to "clarify anomalies." "Surely," it was reasoned, "all would all be vindicated once the full body of evidence had been collected."

Reeber shook his head. It was poor scientific method. When he had admitted his own guilt in the matter, he had poured back over his notes. He worked furiously to restore, as best he could, everything to its pristine, unbiased clarity.

That was what he had done the first day of his wait. That night, trying to relax on the terrace, his mind had returned to his discovering the existence of the Vanguards. At that time he had felt sure they would come for him the next morning.

But the next morning there had been no sign of them. Reeber hadn't cared. He had to record his firsthand discovery of the Vanguards while it was yet fresh in his mind. He had worked passionately, writing every detail of his encounter with the Vanguard Cygnus. He delighted at how much of it agreed so perfectly with the legends. It was amazing. He had also showed where some points of legend appeared to be wrong.

Reeber had become a man obsessed. He hadn't stopped for meals and had worked deep into the night, his eyes stinging from strain. It was four in the morning when he had finally forced himself to bed. He had been tired to the edge of exhaustion, yet he had only slept three hours, and those fitfully. His mind would not let go of the fire of his work.

On the third day, he had arisen, dressed and eaten so quickly that later he had failed to recall what he had had for breakfast. He had only waited an hour for them to come. It had been a hellish hour. His mind had boiled with ideas and recollections. He had felt pressed to add these to his earlier remembrances. When the hour had passed he had devoured his work, not caring anymore whether they came or not.

He would record not only his testimony of the reality of the Vanguards, but his voyage here to Polyphemus as well. He would also recount the vision he had received. He could think of no better word to describe the event that overcame him upon his entrance to Polyphemus than "vision."

His first draft had turned out to be a book-sized record. When he had finished, time had passed, once more, deep into night. Judging from the position of the sun-shell overhead, it looked even close to dawn.

Reeber had enjoyed a great relief. A great weight of responsibility had been lifted from his heart and mind. He had then noticed his gnawing hunger and heavy physical weariness. At last, beginning to relax, he had allowed himself a lengthy shower. Then he had dialed up a fully luxurious and large, gourmet meal.

His feast finished, Reeber made himself tidy up before going to bed. He knew there were a lot of syntax and typographical errors to be gone over later. Even so, he was free of the fear that he might lose his recollections before he could write them. Only clarifying rewrites laid ahead.

At last he climbed into bed, relishing its comfort. He decided to listen to music as he fell asleep. His choice should be something stirring, reflecting his mood; something reminiscent of his personal struggle with truth. He wanted it to reflect his feelings upon boarding the Cygnus. It must be something ultimately triumphant, and yet something that would finally draw him to rest. It should be linked to the Vanguards, if that were possible. A title came to him while he was changing to his pajamas.

There was an ancient, ancient work he had found linked to the Vanguard legends. Its origin was lost in obscurity. All that remained today was its title: *Death and Transfiguration.* It had been more than a decade since Reeber had listened to it. There was a copy among his files, and after a few minutes searching, he pulled it out and had the room's holophonic perform it.

He lay in bed, looking at the stars. The music succeeded in recalling in him all that he had wished it to. Even tired, it brought him to elated tears at its deeply emotional climax, and he did not remember the peaceful, satisfying resolution as he fell, at last, into a deep, soft slumber. He slept easily through the dawning of the fourth day.

The chiming of his door was a nuisance he avoided by covering his head with his pillow. A few seconds later, he was shock-awake, all but running to the phone by the door.

"Yes?" he was urgent--out of breath. His heart raced inside his barrel of a chest.

"It's Melana, Dr. Reeber."

"Where have you been?" he sputtered, rushing to get into his clothes, embarrassed at being

unprepared to go when they finally *had* gotten around to him.

"We needed to bring another expert in before we addressed your artifacts." Her voice tinged with embarrassment.

"You could have *told* me!" Reeber fussed with his hair. He finally gave up on it. He would just have to look scraggy.

There was an uncomfortable hesitation.

"Well?" Reeber grabbed at his ram chips and notes, shoving them quickly inside the safe and sealing it.

"I have been busy elsewhere. I'm sorry. I couldn't get back to you."

He opened the door. But instead of his gaze going to Melana, it skipped past her to the soldiers that stood behind. They must have stood two meters in height and wore the most exotic battle armor Reeber had ever seen. There was a faint, rose colored aura surrounding them--an aura that buzzed softly like high voltage electricity. Finally, he did turn to Melana. Her face immediately told him everything. *She couldn't talk now.* He smiled, encouragingly.

"Well, No harm done. Where to?"

Melana turned to the guards. "Bring Dr. Reeber's safe and belongings, please." She smiled back at him with obvious relief that he had caught the unspoken meaning of her expression. "We're ready for you now. This way, please."

Reeber followed her outside to the island's landing pad. More than a hundred elite-class soldiers waited there. Each wore the same, powerful-looking battle armor as the security guards at the door. The soldiers surrounded a sleek-looking limousine. Reeber only glanced at it, for his attention was drawn upward. In the air above him he heard the whispering, crystalline whines of starships. Twelve Ships of Light glowed like miniature suns as they hovered above the landing pad. They hung perhaps fifty meters overhead. Reeber felt a rush of joy intermingled with excitement at seeing these rare vessels again so soon. The power of those feelings seemed even more intense than when he had first seen the Ships of Light back on the courier ship only a few days earlier. Was it only four days ago? It seemed a much longer span. So much had happened since. He gazed at the squadron of Light Ships, squinting beneath their brilliance. The legends said that when they glowed like this, their power was full and irresistible. Reeber looked beyond their glare and saw twenty heavy battleships suspended in a ring about the island. Their weapons blisters glowed with raw, violet power. Countless Valiant class V fighters swarmed like gnats about the massive vessels.

He chuckled. "Isn't this a little *much* for *me* here at Polyphemus?"

Melana shook her head.

Reeber walked to the limousine. A faint, trade wind wafted exotic perfumes from across the massive seas. The door to the limousine opened and Reeber stepped inside. After a brief survey of the cabin, he went to the conversation pit situated at the center. He sat down at the round table in the middle made of dark, opaque glass. A small bar stood next to the doorway. Reeber watched Melana supervising the loading of the safe and his bags into the rear of the vessel. That task completed, she boarded the limousine and sat opposite him. He watched the door close. The whines of engines fired and the ground began to drift away. It moved like a turntable beneath him. He caught sight of the armored soldiers lifting off beside the limousine. They floated seemingly motionless all about the vessel as it turned, like mere extensions of the ship. Their formidable-looking weapons glowed to blue-white life.

As the limousine began a steep climb, the Ships of Light fell into a spherical formation about the vessel. The enormous stacks and billows of planet-sized thunderheads drifted by and beneath the ship in a gradual, majestic procession. Reeber watched them with continuing fascination, marveling

at their beauty. They were enormous, complex structures. Their planes and steps had infinite varieties that made them incredibly breathtaking.

The sky darkened from blue to black. Quickly, the limousine passed behind the opaque hemisphere that rotated about the local sun and on into complete darkness. Reeber looked down at the surface of Polyphemus. It was a checkerboard of endless ocean and continents that stretched infinitely, impossibly away. No horizon shone or planetary limb, only ever smaller, ever-denser checker patterns. These finally dissolved into a curving distance that measured across thousands of light years in its gradual arc. The surface diminished until only darkness surrounded them. But it was darkness broken by carefully patterned stars shining amidst unusually frequent, often spectacular nebulae. It was as if the whole heavens were an endless canvas upon which were painted thousands of interstellar clouds and stars. Reeber reminded himself with soberness that all of this occurred inside a single structure.

Panels slid down over the windows. Lights came on inside the cabin and the limousine plunged into White Drive.

Reeber sat back in the lounger. He was still tired from too little sleep. Then he remembered Melana, seated quietly opposite him. He opened his eyes and looked at her.

"You have been working hard," she said. "Even without us."

Reeber shrugged. "Understanding the Vanguards is my life's work. I have been recording everything that's happened to me since I discovered the Cygnus and," he shrugged a little, "fixing some things I used to think. "

Melana nodded, heaving her shoulders in a deep sigh. He watched her for any sign that she might now be able to speak freely. She folded her arms, looking down into her lap. Reeber noticed, not for the first time, the loveliness of her form. She wore a simple skirt and white frock. Her hair was up, arranged neatly. There was nothing glamorous about this woman, yet she exuded a powerful personality, one that while determined in its own purposes held a passion or passions for things beyond mere self-interest. She had seemed much more open today—perhaps more kind--sensitive? Might that sensitivity and deep purpose be one and the same? She looked up at him.

"Dr Reeber . . ."

"They sent you to bring me," Reeber interrupted. He felt awkward--dwarfed beneath a woman who was both a Mestrate and an important attorney—important on a galactic scale. Again, he could not deny that Melana was attractive. And, again, he could hardly believe that such a combination of power and the sensitivities Polyphemus had opened to him in his vision could reside in one so young. She could have been one of his students. She looked twenty-eight but acted forty-eight. Quickly, he backed away from passing any judgement on her. She and Morse had stood up for him when he had arrived here. Regardless of her age, Melana was a peer in every sense of the word, perhaps even a friend in a world he did not yet understand--a world where powerful people could fear and hate without knowing a thing about him.

" I . . . I am sorry no one contacted you sooner." Melana still, for some reason, did not look directly at him. Did she feel shame?

"I fear the Lady Portia has . . . is responsible for . . . Well, she told us that Polyphemus had instructed her to have us isolate you for several days, without explanation or even comment to you on the matter. I suspect something else but can't say what."

Reeber studied her face as she fell silent, still looking down at her hands, folded neatly on her lap.

"And you don't feel that was right?" Reeber said, surprised at the boldness of his question, but years of working at a university had taught him politics. It was always essential to know where you

stood in the faculty pecking order. And then *he* felt ashamed. He had spent so much time on campus making sure he knew where he stood—too much time. He sighed. It seemed old habits are not easily discarded.

"I have no proof of ill intent," Melana answered, still not looking at him. "But I must say after Lady Portia's reaction to you the night you arrived . . . "

Reeber held his expression, waiting without comment. He would have to watch himself around the Lady Portia.

"Dr. Reeber--how do *you* feel about all of this?"

The question took Reeber by surprise. His sputtered answer felt silly. "I . . . well, I mean . . .How should I feel?"

Melana stood, walking to the bar. "Care for anything to drink?" she asked without looking at him.

"A nectarine would be fine."

She prepared the beverage in silence, then came over and handed it to him.

"Something's not right," Reeber took the drink. He lifted it to his lips and sipped. "Is it?"

Melana hesitated, her face betraying some sort of inner struggle. Reeber did not push, but waited.

"It's just that so much hinges on all this. We can't afford politics--not with things the way they are."

"Politics?"

"They're already coloring this investigation. We have powerful people here who are already decided on the issue of the Mhyrn artifacts. I'm convinced of it"

"Decided? In what way? On what?"

Melana hesitated. She spoke with the obvious care of an attorney. "On their alleged fraudulence."

The word hit Reeber like a stiff blow to the chest. *Fraudulence!* "The Lady Portia?" he asked. His voice barely concealing the rage that burned inside, looking for someone to personify such a prejudice.

But Melana shook her head. "Her antagonism is founded elsewhere. But I do not believe her incapable of using the prejudice of others to her advantage."

Reeber put the glass down none too gently. "What the Blazes sort of place is this? Who do these people think they are? *Billions* have died from of Hypermotility. If there were the *slightest* chance that these artifacts could do something to help--why not put aside all this nonsense?" But Reeber already knew the answer. Procyx had existed for centuries now--long enough for elaborate theories to emerge. These would naturally have come from the brightest minds in the galaxy: powerful scientists with more clout than a thousand years of tenure could afford. If an *outsider* were to show up with an unexpected solution it *could* wreck someone's life's work, not to mention his reputation. Scientific ethic or no, fear and pride could overpower reason. Reeber could hardly condemn such men and women. He, himself, had suffered from them. The behavior was deplorable. It was also very human.

A great surge of relief swept over him suddenly. He took comfort in the realization that when *he* had been confronted with data that unequivocally dashed his own theories about the Vanguards, he had responded with . . . what? What should he call it? He searched for the right word in his mind. Could it be meekness? Maybe. Humility? Had he actually achieved academic *humility*? So it seemed. He had *willingly* put aside countless hours of research to correct fallacies. Clement Reeber had proven, if only to himself, that he was unafraid to reveal the truth regardless of the personal consequences. The flood of satisfaction that resulted from that realization was so strong that Reeber

nearly reeled beneath its power. Then a quiet, calm, all-pervading voice spoke within his mind.

Without such humility to reexamine the most basic of notions then act accordingly, the dark night will fall--and I am not ready for it. I am doing everything in my power to preserve as many of you as I can against the end, but I cannot save all. There is yet time to reverse the fall--but not much, and I can work with no one who will not listen, the voice said quietly. Then, there was only silence.

Reeber sat in silence, pondering. Then he looked up, trying to verify that no one had entered the room--that the voice was not some sort of Mestrate trick, but the voice of a power he had heard only once before. He and Melana were alone in the midst of White Drive. In reflection, he recognized that familiar feeling again--a burning joy mingled with peace. It was as the power he had felt in his vision aboard the Vanguard. He knew! He turned quickly to look at Melana.

"What is it?" she said, her face a mixture of concern and something else Reeber could not clearly identify. Was it watchful hoping?

Reeber spoke, not really listening to himself. "I . . . I heard a voice within me, and I felt that . . . that incredible feeling of peace one has with the Vanguards." The mere mention of that power threatened to choke Reeber with its joy. The glories of that peace now flooded over him as he spoke of it, almost as if to confirm his statement.

"This voice," Melana asked eagerly. "Was it a man's or a woman's?"

"It was a man's." But when he had heard it, Reeber had not thought to engender it, for it possessed the power of absolute masculinity tempered by the sensitivity of complete femininity. He said as much to Melana.

"It is Polyphemus," she said, her voice quivering with emotion. Her own eyes threatened to flood with tears. "It is! He has confirmed it even to me--to *me!* I have never actually heard him speak before--only felt his influence. But now--Dr. Reeber--you must listen to what he tells you. Do not deny it! Do not try to reason it or rationalize it away." Melana was on her feet, pacing. "It's true! It *is* true! Why, this is incredible! Polyphemus has spoken outside of the Mestrates! This *does* change everything! Can you see that? Your artifacts must hold the answers to Procyx, and Polyphemus knows it. Whatever you do, don't allow yourself to be talked into or out of *anything!* Don't let credentials scare you. Listen for anything Polyphemus might tell you. Anything!"

But Reeber was already asking more in his mind. *Is this true? Are the artifacts the solution?*

But all he felt was encouragement, peace and hope.

Why don't you speak to me? Reeber thought the query. But nothing more was said, and as he considered, Reeber thought he understood why. No further answer would be given because none was needed. The depth of Reeber's conviction was the answer. It blazed within him like the cumulative light of a thousand suns. It was pure knowledge--pure certainty. At this very moment Reeber *knew* that the artifacts could save the galaxy--perhaps even the universe.

But how? he asked Polyphemus. Again there was no reply. At first, Reeber brooded over this. Why didn't Polyphemus just *tell* him? Unless Polyphemus didn't know the specifics.

And then Reeber recalled the incident just before he had first boarded the Vanguard Cygnus. When Morse had asked him to verify the Mhyrn artifacts and the Coss Stone had performed its ritual of floating, apparently evoking the Cygnus to blaze in brilliant new energies. Morse had been so surprised that he had asked the ship to explain what had just happened. Reeber remembered how the vessel had mysteriously replied that it had understood part of the message, but that it was not directed at it--at the Cygnus! There *had to be* something to all this!

Reeber clapped his hands together. He was suddenly on his feet, pacing energetically. He had not, as yet, displayed the power of the Coss Stone here at Polyphemus. What if he did? What if he did right now--here at the very seat of the Vanguard's power? Polyphemus might guard secrets as old as

the Mhyrn artifacts themselves! What if he . . .

"Melana--can I get the artifacts out? Right now?"

She shrugged, helplessly. "They're under maximum protection. No one . . . why? Do you have something?"

Reeber paced more nervously than before. "Yes . . . perhaps! I *must* have them! There's something . . ."

But a chime sounded.

"We're coming out of White Drive," Melana answered his questioning expression. She stepped toward the front of the vessel then turned to him again. "Dr. Reeber--do you *really* have something?"

"I'm sure of it!" Reeber said. "I just don't know what I have yet. But it must be important! I *know* it's important! I just . . . I just . . . "

Suddenly, White Drive dropped away. The window panels retreated. Reeber glanced and then stared out the front view-port at a spectacle he was hardly prepared to see.

The Eye of Polyphemus opened before them like a glowing maelstrom. It was an intricate array of black holes and accompanying accretion nebulae. Magnificent, ancient stars pierced them in a multitude of colors and glories. The sight stirred emotions and depths and powers within Reeber.

Power! Reeber thought, but the thought was more feeling than word. It felt more like some instinctive reaction, for it cut right through logic and resonated within him to his very center. Here was power beyond imagining. Here was both source and doorway to realms and glories glimpsed only in the deepest dreams of joy.

Reeber eased himself back onto the couch. The vision he had endured upon entering Polyphemus flashed through his mind in fresh clarity even as he sat in silence, gazing at The Eye. Pure knowledge seemed to flow through him. He thought into ancient myths of The All Seeing Eye and knew that they were founded, somehow, in *this.* The Eye of Polyphemus saw into the heart and soul, and nothing could be hidden.

The vessel vibrated as it began an intricate, weaving dance among the tug of terrible gravities. It swung and soared between swirling, brilliant nebulae; countless, intermixed rainbows stirred to iridescence by the unseen powers of the black holes and visible power of the ancient, red, orange and golden stars that sparkled within them. The feeling of incredible forces only grew within Reeber.

Now a world of blue oceans and verdant continents grew before the vessel. It seemed suspended at the edge of the nebular array. Clouds spread across its surface in lovely intricacies. A single, pale moon hovered not far above. Nearby shone an old and tired-looking star. Presumably, it was the planet's sun. It burned in pastel orange against the brilliantly-lit spectacle of Polyphemus' Eye. Reeber stood again and joined Melana. The limousine slowed its approach, falling into an orbit that would soon bring it into the atmosphere of the lone world.

"What is this place?" Reeber asked, sensing a kind of longing heaviness he could not identify.

"It is called simply The Old World," Melana answered. "It's history stretches far into the past." She turned to him. "Does it evoke some feeling within you?"

Reeber nodded, searching for the right words. "Loneliness--weariness," then he added, "hope."

Melana smiled, nodding. "Hope," she echoed.

The Limousine flew above a wide ocean. Then, a magnificent complex of cities rose upon the horizon. Marble palaces and towers stood in rings, extending outward from a great, central complex. There were twelve ringed cities, each divided by alternating rings of forest. But Melana told him they were all one city. Each ring of structures and towers glistened in varying color from those of its neighbors.

Reeber's longing shifted quietly to homesickness. *Homesick?* Why? As he watched the city glide beneath him, a thought flickered in his mind. It was as though the Old World was an echo of something he should be able to recognize. But what? How? Try as he might, he could not quite recall. The city evoked distant stirrings of places never viewed but surely known. How could that be?

"The City," Melana said. Without even looking, somehow Reeber knew that she shared all his feelings. "It has several names--Holiness; Kokaubeam; Salem; Enoch."

The names rang resonances of antiquity. Reeber recognized that immediately. They sounded akin to names in the Vanguard mythology. The propriety of each and all burned with rightness within him.

The limousine glided among huge buildings. In glancing about him, Reeber noticed that the escorts had fallen away.

"The escorts . . ."

"When we entered the Eye," Melana answered before he finished. "They are not needed here."

Reeber stepped forward to see better, leaning on a railing before the panoramic window. Melana joined him--carefully avoiding looking at him, and without comment, he knew why. He could not explain the unity of thought and emotion that had smoldered, then ignited between them during the brief interval of this flight. Now it sparked with the intensity of high voltage. He knew she must not look at him, or the feelings they now held in common might burst, too soon, into so powerful a force that they might rush headlong into responding to its intensity improperly--physically.

Where *had* it come from? How could he have shifted so completely from his earlier judgements of Melana and their diverging futures?

Here grew the seed of what Polyphemus had shown him, and it had taken root without the slightest effort on his part or, he guessed, hers. They were evolving toward unity after all, and the earlier oppositions—well they had been swallowed up in this unspoken oneness Reeber had with her. He sensed it was a gift of some kind--this unity of thought and desire and feeling he shared with this royal Mestrate—a gift with a purpose, and to so selfishly personalize it now would somehow destroy it. It was by far the headiest experience he had ever had, even compared to the joys and discoveries of the Vanguards and Polyphemus. This was a singleness of purpose shared with a newly-found kindred spirit--the only kindred spirit he had ever really known--a kindred spirit who was also a lovely woman. And he knew that Melana shared it--all of it. It was not telepathy. It was a kind of unspoken unity. Reeber could think of no better words to describe it. Somehow that unity facilitated connections between them on many levels, connections with no hints of any trespassing. They shared all that was important to them without ever saying a word. Reeber *knew* Melana. It was as if they were old, knowing friends from some distant time, a time either long forgotten or veiled by some inescapable forgetfulness. Now they had been reunited, and even that forgetfulness could not keep them apart any longer. Perhaps when the crisis was over--perhaps when Procyx was destroyed--perhaps then he might court her, and their unity expand naturally into the physical as well, but not yet.

The limousine landed. Reeber struggled to keep from reaching out and touching even Melana's shoulder. She turned her face further away. They *were* one, so it was no surprise to him that she knew and shared all he was thinking and feeling. She knew and agreed, and was helping. And then a new thought occurred to Reeber. Had she seen all this well before him? Was *that* the cause of her aloofness and pulling away back on that first day, and later chatting with him encouragingly as they strolled back to her shuttle?

"I'll get the artifacts," Melana said with agonizing difficulty tainting her voice. She turned quickly for the entrance.

The Limousine had landed in a huge, circular clearing at the center of The City. Twelve magnificent structures stood at the ends of wide parkways that spread out from the landing pad like the spokes of a massive wheel. The parkways were themselves sweeping gardens. The fragrances of rich, floral perfumes drifted and flowed among the trees. They were exquisite, never competing--always complimentary. One fragrance would seem to drift by and end, and there would be an interval of olfactory silence before another scent might swell upon the air.

Reeber turned his attention to the buildings surrounding him. All twelve imposing structures vaguely reminded him of great cathedrals or temples. Each was built of a differently colored, precious-looking stone or crystal which succeeded in holding his gaze with an almost hypnotic power. The varying designs of these cathedrals shared one thread in common--they all looked at once both ancient and futuristic, simple and complex, impressionistic and highly ordered--meticulously, breathtakingly detailed. The architectural style of each edifice varied well from the others, yet together, they evoked a feeling of undeniable unity.

Yes, that was what Reeber felt: unity, power, and purpose on a social scale. The rational Clement Reeber balked at that notion. Utopia? Utopias never worked for long. Yet here he felt it should. It was an entirely emotional reaction--all this reflection on the buildings. Yet these feelings were as real as the ground beneath him. The City spoke to him as surely as if with words. The *words* were emotions that led to conclusions that formed opinions. The more he considered the possibility that the design of the buildings was intended to communicate, the more he became convinced that all that he was interpreting was correct. He felt he understood the City as it intended it should be understood, and the intent *had* been Utopia.

Why not entertain it—just for a moment? As Reeber gave into these sensations of unity, a whole new range of subtler feelings revealed themselves. He began to know things about the City and the world. Strong among them was a sense of great antiquity. The City, while seemingly ancient, possessed an ageless beauty and wondrous craftsmanship, flawlessly executed. It was as if each of the twelve buildings in the circle about him represented the ultimate development in its own revolutionary type of artistic expression--breathtaking in the confidence of its style, seeming both effortless and painstaking in its execution. Reeber decided that he could easily spend hours or even days studying and deciphering the artistry, techniques and symbolism of each style while ever marveling at its overall simplicity. He had never seen anything like these buildings anywhere across the vast, artistic diversities of the galaxy.

Reeber sensed Melana coming out of the limousine behind him and ducking away out of sight. He did not see this, but felt it. He did not turn to look--it would only make things more difficult. Instead, from the direction of an emerald-colored structure, Reeber saw a group of men and women approaching.

"Dr. Reeber," a genial man with a short beard stepped forward, shaking his hand a shade too vigorously. "Thank you so much for coming. You don't know how anxiously we have been waiting for you. I'm Kolrus Beymin, Executive Secretary to the Supreme Hexibuneral."

Reeber saw a huge ring on his left hand--a white opal that flashed some inward anger. Reeber glanced momentarily at the sky. The orange sun shone sufficiently dim to allow one to look at it directly without squinting. The sky itself was blue and clear of clouds. Some of the more brilliant stars Reeber had seen in space twinkled clearly in the daylight. The diffusion of all this mixed light cast no specific shadow anywhere Reeber looked. It was as if the day were overcast, and yet the sky was clear and deep.

Beymin started to urge Reeber toward the others. "We have formed a committee of the finest minds in the galaxy to review your artifacts. This is my staff. Oh say--where are the artifacts?"

Reeber turned to see two security men escorting the gravdollie upon which the safe floated. Reeber turned back to see Beymin gazing at the safe with an odd expression he could not quite identify, but inside Reeber felt a dark kind of heaviness descend on him, as if a weight had been yoked across his heart.

"I can't wait to see them!" Beymin frothed, turning back. His staff gathered around them and they began walking toward the great, emerald structure. Suddenly Beymin turned to Reeber. "Oh, didn't you have someone with you--I thought someone had been assigned . . . " Reeber felt suddenly cautious about telling his man anything--especially about Melana. "Yes. She had other duties," Reeber answered casually.

"Wonderful, wonderful. Hurry, now--we must get started."

They moved to the entrance of the huge structure. It was made of some green-looking stone, not jade or emerald, but something that had the properties of both. Beymin rushed them inside. They had not progressed more than a few meters when a woman in a green robe stepped forward.

"Please--remove your shoes," she said quietly. Reeber *had* felt some inexplicable guilt the instant they had entered. No, guilt was not exactly the right sensation. He had felt that perhaps he was trespassing.

"We're in too great a hurry for such formalities," Beymin said abruptly, tugging at Reeber's arm. But Reeber held back.

"I wish to honor all customs," he said calmly, bending over and awkwardly working at removing his shoes. Two of Beymin's staff stepped forward to help steady him. The instant Reeber's shoes were off, the feelings of trespassing evaporated, and he found appreciation in the woman's eyes.

"Now we must move on," Beymin said, pulling at Reeber again. None of Beymin's staff made any gesture toward removing their own shoes.

They walked down a long, vaulting corridor. Great doors stood closed on either side. The roof, high overhead, was actually a continuous, massive prism, separating the blue of the daytime skies into a reminder of the spectral radiance Reeber had seen in the heavens surrounding The Old World.

"What is the origin of this custom of removing the shoes?" Reeber asked as he was hustled along. Beymin shrugged. "Tradition--pure and simple. I appreciate your courtesy, but it was really unnecessary, and it only encourages these silly traditions to go on and on."

Now Reeber was sure he did not like this man. Since discovering the reality of the Vanguards, Reeber had learned to treat customs and traditions with respect, for one never knew the origin or power such traditions might hold.

They turned aside into the only one of the great doorways that stood open. Beyond it another hallway stretched in a gentle curve that twisted downward. They traversed it for nearly a hundred meters before reaching a spacious anteroom. Here, a young woman sat at a desk, her eyes scanning rapidly across a cube of color that floated above her desk. The writing inside the cube evolved as she moved her eyes over it. She glanced up and the cube froze.

"Yes?"

Beymin stepped forward. "Please tell Hexibuneralist Collins that Doctor Reeber is here."

The woman nodded, then smiled. "He will greet Dr. Reeber shortly. Please take a seat." Without waiting for an answer, she returned to her work inside the cube.

Beymin's face reddened. He almost said something, then seemed to think better of it. Instead, he turned to Reeber and gestured him toward one of the contourmorphs. Reeber sat silently, looking around him at the anteroom. Its decor was disturbingly out of place with the spirit of rest of the building. It was colored in grays and maroons. Paintings cluttered the wall--expensive examples

of the latest wave of Avant Garde expressionism. To Reeber it was the latest surge in artistic self-indulgence. Instead of impressing him, the paintings merely made him uneasy.

Fifteen minutes passed. Beymin began pacing. Twice, he nearly succeeded in speaking to the receptionist, but twice he restrained himself. Half an hour later, the woman looked up and nodded. The doorway behind her opened and Beymin all but pulled Reeber to his feet and shuttled him on inside.

An empty desk waited at the far end of the room. A large light sculpture floated at the ceiling near the center of the circular room, providing an ever-shifting subtlety of illumination. Directly beneath it was an altar--at least it looked like an altar to Reeber. RAM chips and a tray of dirty dishes rested on this altar. Beymin hurried Reeber past it and invited him to sit in a plush contourmorph that faced the desk. Beymin waited until the safe was brought in and placed next to Reeber's chair.

"The Hexibuneralist wishes to see Doctor Reeber alone," the woman's voice came softly from the walls. Again, Beymin almost said something, then turning away he shooed the others, leaving Reeber alone in the office.

The walls were filled with an odd mixture of ROM libraries and old books. Each of the latter was encased in a dully-buzzing orange aura--a stasis field that preserved it against time. Reeber stared aghast. A stasis field for just one of those books would cost several times his yearly salary, and there must have been thousands of books thus preserved in this library. Reeber heard the soft swish of a door opening and turned to see Markus Collins enter the office. He wore a scholar's robe and held a pipe that wafted an exotic aroma. His head was bald but sported a full beard that was sculpted using the latest micro-styling rage. Each hair of his beard followed a carefully structured path creating an effect of flawless, Olympian rings--a Zeusian beard that looked like scrolls--very Hellenistic. Reeber rose and Collins smiled, walking across the floor and taking his hand.

"Doctor Reeber--thank you for coming. Sorry for the delay. I was called into an unavoidable executive conference just as you arrived.

Reeber smiled. "Quite all right."

Collins gestured for him to sit down and moved around behind the desk. He pushed some chips aside and laid his pipe in its cradle. A stasis bubble appeared about it and the smoke inside froze in the air.

"A very expensive blend," Collins grinned, responding to Reeber's stare. "I need to be frugal these days. Now, let's get down to business." He leaned back and brought his fingertips together, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair.

"Tomorrow we will be entering a conference to study your artifacts here. I wanted to meet with you for a few minutes ahead of time to . . ." here, Collins hesitated as if looking for the exact words. " . . . Become personally acquainted with the artifacts and discover any information you feel I should know before going in."

"I don't know what you mean," Reeber said, suspecting exactly what the galaxy's chief academician meant. Still, he wanted to make sure he understood before things went any further.

"These are troubling times--for science, I mean, and for the scientific method. This Procyx business has really thrown us some curves. If I knew about any *surprises* before revealing it to the committee I could help, uh, deflect any embarrassment our fellow academicians on the panel might suffer."

Reeber gazed at the Hexibuneralist, saying nothing.

"Besides, there is a Mhyrnian scholar on the panel *and* the Lady Portia, representing Polyphemus. I just thought that things might go easier for you if I knew of any surprises now."

Reeber looked down at his hands. "Aren't surprises a necessary risk of any line of scientific

study?"

"Oh, of course, of course. But, as I said, these are troubling times. I appeal to you as a fellow academician. With the fate of whole worlds in the balance, the theories of today's science are under incredible scrutiny. One false move and--well, billions of lives could be jeopardized." Collins hesitated then his face darkened. "Why are you determined to hold back? There is nothing scientific about keeping secrets."

Now it was out in the open. They thought he was keeping something from them. Reeber somehow kept calm.

"Surprises and secrets are two different things, Doctor Collins."

"Master of Doctors," Collins corrected with an unfriendly smile.

"Master of Doctors, then--what I can't understand is why you feel that I am keeping secrets."

"You have told practically no one about the artifacts you possess. That is, I suppose, understandable, being that one of them is made of solid pluridium--*and* that they are *illegally* in your possession . . ."

"Now just a minute," Reeber was on his feet. Collins waved him down.

"Easy. No prosecution is planned, though several counts could easily be invoked. You see, things have happened that you may not have heard about. The Federation has just recently succeeded in reestablishing diplomatic relations with Mhyrn. Part of a new treaty states that any and *all* Mhyrnian artifacts held in Federation possession *must* be returned to Mhyrn immediately." Collins sat back, looking absently at the ceiling. "You and I both know that were it not for some of the astro-archaeologists that *took* Mhyrnian artifacts away from the planet, they might never have been known to us. The loss to science would be immeasurable.

"So, Doctor Reeber--the artifacts you now guard so dearly must soon be returned to Mhyrn. One of the main reasons for this conference is to try to understand them as best we can before they slip forever from our grasp."

Reeber thought about that. Something did not sound quite right about this. "Master of Doctors--tell me, if the purpose of all of this is merely to reclaim a couple of lost artifacts to hand over to Mhyrn, then why did a Vanguard bring me here at break-neck speeds, under the tightest security I have ever seen? It's been almost ridiculous. What is really going on here?"

"Well, yes. I can understand your confusion."

Reeber frowned. He was not confused.

Collins sighed, then stood up and walked around the desk to sit on its front edge. "Are you familiar with Gelding's model of Hypermotility?"

"A little," Reeber said.

"Briefly it is this. The destruction of stars by Hypermotility is not the function of random quantities. It is directly correlated with the relative age of the star and/or its distance from Procyx. The closer a star is to its own death and/or the closer it resides to Procyx, the more likely it is to fall to Hypermotility. You may not know this, but Hypermotility has now destroyed all the stars within more than two hundred light years of Procyx. A lot of stars beyond that two hundred light-year radius are gone too, but *every star within that radius is ruined*. Ahrgol just went, not a week ago. *All* the stars near Procyx are now gone--all but *one*."

Reeber waited. Inside him, a thrill of wonder had begun to stir. He knew what Collins was about to say even before the words came out.

" . . . All but Mhyrn. Mhyrn is within a light decade of Procyx. And it is an old star--incredibly old. Only recently have Tyskan measurements been made on Mhyrn. They clearly place its age at fifteen billion years.

"That's impossible," Reeber interrupted.

"It is. It does not fit any models of the early evolution of the universe that exist today. But what is more immediately incredible is that Mhyrn is, even now, absolutely stable. Gelding's model says that it should have been one of the first stars to fall to Hypermotility, if not the first. Gelding's model has proven accurate for all other stars."

"So the model is wrong?" Reeber asked, more rhetorically than otherwise.

"We do not believe so," Collins answered. "We believe that something inherent in the Mhyrnian system--perhaps something about the nature of the Mhyrnian planets, is somehow protecting it."

Reeber went silently to the safe and began opening it. Collins hesitated, watching. He went on, but excitement at what he guessed Reeber was doing could not be hidden in his voice.

"And there is this--and this is the most frightening part of all. We discovered it as we began gathering all the Mhyrn artifacts that were taken off world during the mining scandals."

"The older a Mhyrnian artifact is, the more technologically sophisticated it is." He shook his head, watching intently as Reeber removed the Coss stone and orb, holding them carefully. "Do you understand what that means? It is a most frightening challenge to the long held dogmas concerning the evolution of life and intelligence. This evidence about Mhyrn seems to indicate that, at the very beginning, life appeared abruptly--suddenly in the universe, and that that life was intelligent and incredibly advanced in all ways--technologically, culturally, socially, and morally. The evidence also points to a subsequent decline--the result, perhaps, of warfare on an interstellar scale. That part is unclear. What *does* seem ever more clearly supported is the idea that the beginnings of humanoid life is not to be traced from some old, lost *Mother World* where it is believed to have evolved on its own originally. Instead, *Mhyrn* seems to be the first world where life appeared anywhere in the galaxy, *and* it appeared full-blown, with no fossil evidence indicating any kind of evolution. It was, apparently, the first of all life—in our galaxy, at least."

"But is the antiquity of intelligent life so revolutionary an idea?" Reeber placed the artifacts on the desk then returned to the safe. He rummaged around back inside it, finally putting his fingers on the tuning fork. "Who, after all, built the Vanguards and--and Polyphemus?"

"You know the myths. The Vanguards and Polyphemus are attributed to the genius of Varn Mestre and his great artisans."

Reeber smiled. Collins had just entered *his* area of expertise. "True. That is the prevailing idea. It makes sense. Mestre was the first to appear, commanding these ships—and doing so with such ease that it is assumed that he was their maker. He was never recorded as actually having said he either was or wasn't their creator."

"What are you getting at?"

"It is too soon for me to spell out what I suspect. I need more evidence. But it may be that the Vanguards are far more ancient than we have ever suspected--and that there is, indeed, some connection here--a connection between the super science of the ancient Mhyrnians and the creation of the all but invincible Vanguards." Reeber now held up the tuning fork.

"My specialty of studies is Vanguard mythology. I have never had but a passing interest in Mhyrnian artifacts. I appreciated the rarity of these objects, but could never understand why Benjamin Coss would send such antiquities to *me* for safe keeping. When he was killed in the Mhyrnian uprising, we never had a chance to discuss things further.

"So I wish to prove to you that I am keeping no secrets. I share with you all that I have learned about the science and behavior of the artifacts. What I would like to do now is show you what the artifacts do." He struck the tuning fork on the edge of the desk.

As it had always done, the Coss stone rose slowly from the desk, turned on end and hovered for a full minute, then slowly, gently, returned to its exact place. Collins only gawked. For nearly a full minute afterwards he stared at the thing.

"This is incredible," he said finally. "I have never--none of the Mhyrnian artifacts we have seen so far have displayed anything of this kind. Doctor Reeber, we must untangle this . . ."

Reeber then decided to drop the bomb. He supposed he should have kept it to himself for a little longer--until Morse could be there to verify it. It was the foundation of Reeber's new idea about Mhyrn and the Vanguards. He spoke as calmly as he could.

"And here is the kicker. When I was to be picked up by the Vanguard Cygnus and brought here, I was asked to verify that the artifacts were indeed the very ones I had brought aboard the courier ship. I used a tuning fork, just as I did now. And the Cygnus--well, it reacted."

"Reacted?"

"Yes. It was as though some sort of golden power flowed across it while the stone floated in the air. It stopped when the stone returned to its resting place. Commodore Morse, who was with me, saw it--and he tried to find out what had happened. He was told, apparently, that the Cygnus had understood the message, but that it was for someone else."

Collins stood staring for two full minutes. He seemed far away, his thoughts racing. Abruptly, his receptionist's voice came out of the walls. "Yes, sir. I have contacted the Cygnus. Commodore Morse *will* reach Polyphemus tomorrow morning with the intentor he was sent to bring. I have called the full Council to emergency session. I have also arranged, as you requested, that--Merrimoor, the Mhyrnian be detained for a time. He said he is puzzled by the delay, but understands that diplomatic propriety allows you to proceed without him. He did add that he *will* come as soon as propriety allows to accept the artifacts officially."

Collins nodded once, then turned to Reeber. "Come. We haven't a moment to spare. Bring your artifacts--and that tuning fork. I'm pretty sure the tones . . ." his voice fell away. "Curse it! We may only have a few hours crack at these things and we've got to make the best of every second!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Hidden Agendas
I

Reeber paced. He felt uncomfortable wearing a commencement gown and hood just for a meeting -- and an emergency meeting at that. He caught a glimpse of Beymin looking at him. The aide also wore a gown, hood and mantle--and his hood was so ornate that it looked ludicrous. Reeber saw something in Beymin's eyes that lingered only for an instant then was glossed over in a practiced smile and nod. In that instant Reeber had seen contempt in Beymin's eyes.

Contempt? Why? The aide hardly knew him. Reeber pondered over this as he studied Beymin and saw him laughing while speaking softly to another aide. They both wore hoods that told of multiple degrees and honors--far more than anyone alive should ever be able to amass in a single lifetime. Reeber examined his own hood. It was modest in comparison to theirs, displaying only six degrees, five fellowships, three chairs and seven honorables. Yet back home, Reeber's hood would have been one of the most colorful, and would have commanded him a place of high honor at any commencement review. Suddenly, Reeber thought he understood the reason for their contempt. Compared to them, Reeber's gown announced him as a provincial. Yes, he held degrees—but, from their standpoint, only from small universities at the rim, and Reeber had heard that the core worlds often joked about the rim.

"What could they be discussing in there!?" Reeber blurted out, looking at the clock for the seventeenth time in five minutes. "I thought these artifacts were the prime purpose of this meeting!"

Beymin was immediately at his side. He smiled at Reeber, speaking as one who has spent his life waiting in antechambers. He even laughed about it. "Oh, Dr. Reeber--surely you must be able to see that any time a meeting is called at such a high level--well, it is an opportunity to cover many items. Master of Doctors Collins also has many duties as Academic chair of the Supreme Hexibuneral. He must attend to these other duties as well. He is too important to . . ." here, Beymin stopped. He smiled again. Reeber looked into his eyes. It was there again. Contempt—impatience,

pride. Beymin spoke on, smoothly. "He will call us at the right time."

Reeber did not answer. He walked, still shoeless, across the wide floor to a window that opened over the city. He had never left the great structure--the great cathedral where he had been brought just hours ago. He looked over at the safe, hovering between two security guards. It was still sealed and waiting. He felt a single trail of cold perspiration run down his ribs. His mouth was dry, his palms clammy and his stomach pale.

Why couldn't they get on with it? Scores of worlds and millions of lives might be saved by quick action. This Reeber knew. He knew that the artifacts held the answers to Procyx.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Reeber heard Beymin's voice like a trumpet echoing hollowly in the large antechamber. "This is a restricted area . . ." Reeber turned to see Melana standing at the doorway, gazing urgently at him. Immediately, he went to her.

"It's all right, Beymin. She's my . . ." he searched for the right word that would impress him, " . . . associate."

"You mentioned no associate in your work."

"Well I am now!" Reeber all but growled at the little man.

"Oh? She has a message for you, then?"

"Thank you, Beymin," Reeber smiled, taking Melana by the elbow and moving her quickly away. Beymin stood nervously watching after. Reeber took her clear across the room to stand by the window.

"I'm sorry, Clement," she said. She held her arms about her as if she were cold. "I had to come."

"What is it?"

"I don't know for sure. I . . . it seemed that you need . . ." Melana flushed, " . . . me here."

Reeber barely resisted the impulse to pull her into his arms. It was true. He now felt anxiety drain out of him and a balm of rightness swell up in its place.

"What's going on?" Melana asked, looking around her.

"An emergency meeting to discuss the Mhyrn artifacts, only the meeting has been going on for two hours now and here I sit, with the artifacts, waiting."

"You need to be in there," Melana said with sudden urgency. "Right now! Oh, Clement, I know this! I know this! Go in there right now!"

Reeber glanced at Beymin. He stood, trying simultaneously to hear and yet not appear to be trying to hear what they were saying.

"Go!" Melana whispered so urgently that Beymin heard it. Reeber did not hesitate. He strode over to the entrance and pushed open the doors.

The guards did not try to interfere. Reeber did not even hear Beymin's protests--did not even see Melana placing herself in Beymin's path to prevent him from entering. All Reeber saw before him was blackness--a void. He had crossed the threshold of the room beyond, but he stood in a void.

There was silence until Reeber heard Collins' voice sounding from across the room. "It's all right. Come in, Doctor Reeber."

Reeber hesitated.

"We are watching a simulation." Collins' voice held the slightest edge of impatience. "You are safe where you are, just please close the doors."

"My associate . . ." Reeber said, still disconcerted.

"Associate?"

"I'm sorry sir . . . " Beymin appeared suddenly beside Reeber. He did not seem in the least disoriented by the simulation. "I tried to stop him."

"Let him come in, Beymin. Now, did you say *associate*, Dr. Reeber?"

"Melana," was all Reeber managed to say.

"His escort," the voice of the lady Portia said evenly from the darkness. "Hardly his associate."

There was a pause.

"I don't see any harm in allowing her to come in as well," Collins said. Reeber could discern nothing in the tone of his voice--only polish. "And you may as well bring the safe in, too." The safe floated up next to Melana and Reeber as they themselves seemed to hover in the air, surrounded by blackness. Beymin pulled the doors closed a little too harshly, plunging Reeber and Melana into total darkness.

"Now please, Dr. Hastings," Collins' voice said quietly. "Continue."

Reeber felt Melana slide up beside him. He felt her touching his arm. She was warm--reassuring. The touch was electric. He found himself both drawn to it and struggling to escape it so that he might concentrate, for he now also knew that what was being discussed was important. As courteously as he could, he made himself move away from Melana just a fraction. Immediately, he felt more focused, and Melana did not touch him again.

"Restore depth," a voice said from the darkness. "Magnification at exponential minus 427."

Suddenly, atoms surrounded Reeber and Melana. The nuclei glowed within multiple shells of electrons which themselves glowed like differently colored bubbles.

"This is a simulation representing a sample of space. One cubic kilometer of the continuum was obtained during the Procyx Probe series. As you recall, only one of that group of ten probes was not lost and actually succeeded in collecting and returning a cubic kilometer of continuum to us. The date of collection was about three months after Procyx first appeared, several centuries ago. This simulation is an accurate representation of that cubic kilometer of space at the time of collection. As you can see, the population looks fairly normal for a cubic kilometer of continuum. The proportions of hydrogen, helium and heavier elements are quantitatively correct for a random sampling of space time located at the edge of the Galaxy. It is representative--all, that is, except for one anomaly. Shift simulation to coordinates x-10 to the minus 14.008; y-10 to the minus 557.179932 and z-10 to the minus 129.15."

The microcosm that surrounded Reeber spun and reeled like stars and worlds rushing by. He had to steady himself against the wall, then watched.

In the center of his vision Reeber saw an atom unlike any of those he had ever encountered. A complex cluster of nuclei bonded together as if in an incredible array, seemingly infinitely convoluted. Around this dazzling nuclear superstructure clung literally hundreds of ever-larger shells of electrons. Multiple electron shells were common among all natural elements. But here, the shells were themselves complexes of shifting patterns--almost as if the incredible orbits traced by the shells were somehow resonating and phasing among themselves. This impossible atomic structure grew to fill the room.

"Pluridium," the voice said quietly. "It is the only substance in the universe that is so complex in its structure that it actually exists several seconds into both the past and the future. Pluridium is the only element whose individual component atoms are both as similar and simultaneously different from one another as, say--any two human beings are both similar and different from one another. Pluridium is the one element that can only be constructed within the plastic space-time fluidity of hyperspace."

There was a general murmur in the room. Reeber had a sudden shock. He had not guessed that so many might be here."

"And this is an accurate rendering of the frozen continuum cube captured by the Procyx Probe, Dr. Hastings?" a feminine voice asked from far to Reeber's right.

"It is. A perfect rendering--at the moment of collection. It then took several years of deep, microscopic image scanning and filtering to obtain the data that would allow us to construct this model," Hastings' voice replied. "But I assure you it is accurate. It was gathered at a distance of point seven light years from Procyx."

Collins' voice cut in suddenly. "Hyperspace! Dr. Hastings, are you telling us that Procyx is merely a constantly refreshing window into hyperspace?"

"Naturally, that was our first conclusion. Pluridium simply does not occur naturally in the universe . . ."

"Except on Mhyrn," Reeber found himself blurting out. An uneasy silence ensued. Immediately, Reeber regretted his comment. He could all but feel the animosity toward his intrusion, like a child thinking himself wise by declaring the obvious in the company of adults.

"Except on Mhyrn," Hastings repeated. "Dr. Reeber is correct. And Mhyrn is relatively close to Procyx. One might then assume that since pluridium occurs naturally on Mhyrn . . . that, in fact, pluridium can be found everywhere in the space *surrounding* Mhyrn--that *Mhyrn* is the source of the Pluridium found there, and not Procyx."

There was a general murmur of consent.

"A fair theory. But a century before the advent of Procyx, when pluridium was discovered on Mhyrn in such abundance, extensive samplings were taken in the space surrounding Mhyrn. As you know, it is cheaper to glean even one atom of pluridium from a cubic kilometer of space than it is to manufacture it in hyperspace. Out of the sixteen hundred eighty-two samplings taken of the space surrounding Mhyrn, not one--*not one* contained *any* pluridium. And listen to this! One of those samples was taken within two astronomical units of where Procyx would eventually appear. No pluridium was found in that space before Procyx's appearance."

"Now here--here is an atom of pluridium in space after the coming of Procyx. Clearly, the pluridium you see here can *only* be related to Procyx and *not* to Mhyrn."

Reeber sensed that Melana felt tension in the room. He felt it too. While pure arrogance colored Hastings' voice, there was a broad smattering of it beyond. The room was thick with it. Hastings continued.

"Now, let us advance the display to show population shifts over time. Sequence two, please."

The pluridium atom shrank suddenly to a point. All around it, randomly spaced, a myriad of other points appeared.

"Elements are shown in colors. Red is hydrogen, yellow--helium; green is carbon; blue--oxygen. All other elements--trace quantities--are shown in white. As you can see, the pluridium is lavender. Now watch what happens as time passes."

Day, month and year readouts appeared, floating in space. The days accelerated into weeks, which accelerated into months, then into years. At first, little happened. The atoms drifted in random paths. Then, one by one, they began to change color. The heavy, trace elements went first--going from white to lavender, then the lighter elements and finally the red points winked, almost in unison, into lavender.

"Just ten years--and look what has happened. Somehow, all the elements have mutated into pluridium. Where they acquired the extra mass, we cannot tell--although I have a theory I will share momentarily. You may recall that ten years after Procyx appeared the first star system went into Hypermotility. This--this that we have just seen is obviously the trigger mechanism of Hypermotility. The shifting of elemental construction on the atomic scale--even of just a few atoms--begins a kind of

chain reaction among all the matter surrounding it. Once one atom changes into pluridium, all the others surrounding it go into a frenzied, kind of impossible activity: Hypermotility."

"Now watch. Only a few hours pass in this next phase."

All the pluridium atoms suddenly burst, and sprays of varicolored particles spun outward in a pinwheel then winked out--all, that is, except amber colored particles.

"Destruction," Hastings said unnecessarily. "Total dissolution on the atomic scale--complete with the expulsion of absolutely every atomic and quantum particle known to exist, plus a couple we've never seen before. Only the gravitons remain--those amber colored points."

"What happened to the rest?"

"Further dissolution into sub-atomic and finally sub-quarkian particles."

"Particular evaporation?"

"No. Once the matter, photons, temporons--all the basic quanta is dissolved into its component parts, dissolution ceases. All, that is, except for the gravitons. They remain intact. There are, apparently, no smaller components to gravitons. Although we did discover, interestingly enough, that the gravitons polarized--plus and minus gravitationally."

"You mean anti-gravity?"

"We now know it exists, yes. But let us return to the phenomenon of destruction. It's as if the life span of all matter -- calculated to last, ultimately, for countless trillions of years -- has been abridged. Complete entropy is achieved."

"That is mathematically impossible!" a new voice complained from the darkness. "One may approach entropy, but . . ."

"Gravitons were emitted!" Hastings interrupted. "Do you know how long an atom must exist in its entropy-ward travel through time before a graviton might be discharged? Our current estimate is 10 to the fifty-third years! We have just witnessed a kind of time lapse view of what should, under normal conditions, take trillions upon trillions of years to occur in the normal course of the running down of the universe.

"Is it any wonder that when time and space are so violently disrupted, worlds break up, stars explode--even time jumps and jerks in sporadic seizures?"

"But isn't the pluridium stable," yet another voice said in the darkness. "Even through Hypermotility. I read a study on that recently."

"I read it, too," Hastings retorted. "It's wrong. Apparently, any pluridium created here -- in time and space and not Hyperspace -- will eventually dissolve. You all know the properties of pluridium--its ability to alter, focus, even amplify any energy pumped into it. Know what you're doing and you can pump light into it and get gravity out, or gravity into it and get the strong force out--in incredible quantities—that sort of thing. Procyx is, somehow, pumping its energies into the universe, manufacturing pluridium along the way and subsequently jarring all matter into destruction. But--Procyx is doing even more than this." His voice raised. "Sequence three, please."

The readouts passed years into decades, then into centuries. Suddenly, the amber points began to coalesce, seeming to create several points of coherent light, each a different frequency or single color. The gravitons now began to move about these points of laser light--tracing bizarre ellipses about them, strange fractal-looking paths that looked somehow both chaotic and at the same time highly organized.

"Stop," Hastings called. All motion ceased.

"This--*This* is the new order--the new state of matter, built from shattered atoms. Particles of . . . shall we call it Procyxian matter? Nuclei made of something, or constructed in a way we cannot imagine, with gravitons orbiting them like electrons. Here we have an alien cosmological order,

complete with its own set of physical laws and behaviors. Resume sequence."

The glowing points of coherent light began to brighten. Atoms from beyond the range of view began to fall into them, flashing into pluridium just before they disappeared inside the alien atoms. New gravitons appeared in ever-varying, complex orbits. The points of coherent brilliance grew beyond mere points. Now they were tiny spheres. The orbiting gravitons began shifting the color of these spheres ever so slightly, back and forth, a hue or two, along the visible spectrum--the frequency of change never exactly repeating, yet ever cycling.

Abruptly, the simulation darkened.

"We have reached today in our study of this phenomenon." Hastings' voice spoke almost over-dramatically through the now total blackness. "That is the end of this simulation, but I have more to show. Please maintain the Holocomp."

"Where is the sample now?" a voice asked.

"We had to return that cubic kilometer of continuum," Hastings said without expression.

"He's concealing something," Melana whispered. "Or perhaps he's readying himself for rhetoric."

Reeber nodded in the darkness. Even *he* could feel Hastings' deliberateness, as if he were carefully walking the line between milking a performance and wanting to appear absolutely emotionless and logical about everything--so logical that none would dare challenge him. Hastings went on.

"The Vanguard Elijah is towing the continuum sample, held in stasis, to its original region near Procyx in emergency White Drive. There the Vanguard will release it. Doctors and Masters, had we not put a stasis field around these alien particles -- what we have named Procyxian Neo-atoms -- their energies and forces would eventually have overwhelmed our very containment systems. Nothing keeping that cubic kilometer of space in isolation could have prevented those neo-atoms from beginning to pull matter from outside—from our very laboratory into it, changing it in favor of its alien order. Procyx is the most dangerous threat to the continuing existence of the universe we have ever encountered."

There was total silence. Collins cleared his throat and asked, "So what exactly is Procyx?"

"A tear in space--a rift in the continuum. Procyx is a leak into another universe, passing directly through hyperspace." He chuckled once. "Actually, it's more likely a leak *from* another cosmos *down* into our own. The alien universe on the other side has the higher energy--the higher *pressures*, if you will. *It* is invading us, not we it."

Another pause ruled the group. Then a voice Reeber recognized as Lady Portia's spoke. "So what is to be done?"

"Using the data gained from centuries of observation, I have arrived at a significant solution to the Procyx problem." Hastings could barely contain himself. "Run model one, please."

A Procyxian Neo-atom appeared. It shone a brilliant, green coherence. Layer upon layer of gravitons orbited it in complex, shifting shells. As the dynamics of the shell structure mutated, the color of the single, spherical nucleus shifted first toward yellow-green, then back through green to blue-green.

"Each Procyxian Neo-atom--each color has a different number of graviton shells--always an even number of shells. Moreover, every other graviton shell is charged oppositely to the ones on either side--positive, then negative, then positive, then negative, and so on. This allows for stability. Watch what happens when we pump positive gravitons at the Neo-atom."

A stream of amber points--gravitons--streamed at the Neo-atom. The gravitons were all absorbed as they touched the outer graviton shell. Seconds later, the nucleus grew in size.

"You see, the addition of positively charged gravitons--in fact of all particles naturally present in our cosmological order--increases the size of the nucleus, as well as the size of the gravitons orbiting the nucleus."

"But negative gravitons are not naturally occurring in this universe. They can exist here, but like pluridium, they never occur under natural circumstances. Watch what happens when I bombard the Neo-atom with negatively charged gravitons."

A flow of blue points poured at the model of the Procyxian neo-atom. Immediately, the color of the nucleus began to shift. The graviton shells burst apart, their particles hurtling off in all directions. The nucleus continued to shift color, through green, then into yellow, orange then red.

"Longer wavelengths," a voice said in a hush.

"Lower energy?" another voice added.

"Lower energy." Hastings confirmed. Now the nucleus fell into shades of gray. "Heat, microwaves and now radio waves."

The nucleus began to shudder. The flow of negative gravitons continued, uninterrupted.

"But where . . ." a voice started, but Hastings cut him off.

"Watch! Watch!"

The Procyxian Neo-atom burst in a blast of white brilliance. Immediately replacing it was a cloud of expanding, sub-quarkian particles.

"Now I shall accelerate time," Hastings said, casually. The sub particles began to condense into quarks, and then finally into atoms--hydrogen atoms--thousands of them. There was a quiet murmur.

"A new beginning!" Hastings could not contain himself now. "Lights on, please." The room appeared around Reeber in a comfortable restoration of illumination.

Reeber was shocked to see himself at the entrance of an amphitheater. Seated at desks composing the tiered row above row were scholars, scientists and researchers, each clad in a gown with hoods and mantels. He noticed that the greater the honors shown on the gowns, the higher the academician sat. On the row just below Collins, Reeber saw a short, balding man standing, all but grinning. "Master of Doctors Hastings," Melana whispered. The little man wore a bristly beard that surrounded his face. Its hairs stood out like the bristles of a shaving brush. It was the most outrageous styling Reeber had ever seen.

"Clearly, this is the solution!" Hastings announced in his motivational speaker voice. "Ladies and gentlemen--negatively charged gravitons *is* the solution.

Silence reigned, then the woman seated next to him began to clap. The others on Hastings' row joined in, then the row beneath, and the row beneath and on until all were applauding. Reeber felt the pressure. He began applauding as well, knowing perfectly well that it was too soon to award such adulation. When he looked over at Melana, she was not clapping. He immediately felt ashamed and stopped. He marveled at her courage. She, obviously, knew it was too soon as well, but had been wise enough to withhold.

High on the tier, Hastings raised his hand for quiet.

"My dear colleagues, this is premature . . ."

"I'll say," Melana whispered into Reeber's ear. He stifled a smile.

"But, appreciated," Hastings continued. "These findings are the result of countless hours of study and even more computer hours, using the most sophisticated systems in the Federation . . ."

"Here comes the sales pitch," Melana whispered.

"Of course, I would never present such a model had it not been checked and verified by the finest minds in the Galaxy."

Reeber felt uneasy. True, the computer model looked accurate. Everything looked flawlessly logical, and yet there was a hole in it. Only a week ago, Reeber might never have given but passing notice. The old Clement Reeber would have looked at the man's credentials and let *them* serve to rationalize denial of any problem he might have seen. After all, the man was brilliant. Surely, he would have addressed this concern first off, since it was so obvious even to an academician like Clement Reeber. That assumption, plus the fear of censure from a collective, brighter scientific community -- all of whom, cautiously, while not appearing to be cautious, supported Hastings' findings -- would have easily --too easily -- cajoled Reeber into dismissing the gnawing problem he saw in the presentation of Hastings' solution. He felt an urging to speak it--voice it, but already felt unwelcome. So he kept quiet. Better to talk to Hastings one on one when the meeting ended. He took a deep breath, convincing himself that that *was* the proper procedure. But suppressed inside him, Reeber knew something was wrong, terribly wrong.

Hastings went on.

"Our team of top quantum physicists, Astrophysicists, temporal and microcosmic physicists has evaluated and re-evaluated the results of this computer model. Our most exhaustive efforts have been unable to find any flaw in it. You each have, in front of you, a reader chip containing all the data, a model base of the simulation you just saw and a full prospectus on the course of action I am now proposing."

There was a general shifting among the audience as people checked their folders. Reeber saw Hastings turn around as if Collins had just said something. Hastings nodded with approval.

"I have received word that the Elijah has, in fact, successfully returned the sample of Procyxian space to its point of origin near Procyx. The Elijah is now traveling to the point at which we believe Procyx is most vulnerable to the forces we will be pouring into it. All of the other Vanguards are en route to rendezvous with the Elijah . . ."

"All except the Cygnus," Collins interrupted. "It has, I have been told, just arrived with its passenger. Commodore Morse should be arriving with her shortly. Then the Cygnus will join the others at the rendezvous point."

Reeber almost spoke up again.

"Now," Collins went on. "We will attend to the matter of the Mhyrn artifacts, which Doctor Reeber has brought with him."

"With all due respect," Hastings said, smiling, raising his hand casually in a gesture of restraint. "Don't you think we should wait for the Mestrate the Cygnus is bringing?"

Collins looked at him. Again, it seemed as if there was some sort of silent communication going on between them. Reeber felt it strongly in the silence that followed.

"Don't let them do that," Melana whispered. "They're talking by biotranz. I don't know what they're saying, but it doesn't feel right."

Reeber wet his lips and spoke in a projection that filled the room. "A good point." All eyes turned on him. "While we wait--as a courtesy to me, Master of Doctors Hastings, would you mind reviewing for me the course of action you plan to take against Procyx, based on the data and model you just demonstrated?"

Collins shrugged. Hastings turned, intertwining his fingers on the counter before him, looking down at Reeber and Melana.

"I see nothing on your robes to indicate that you have more than a rudimentary understanding of physics."

Reeber laughed. "Physics 101, 301 and 425."

"Quite so," Hastings looked pleased. "I shall keep it simple."

"Thank you," Reeber flushed with a mixture of embarrassment, anger and resentment. He could feel the tension in Melana as if it burned like fire. He took a deep breath and listened.

"You saw that introducing a stream of positively charged gravitons only increased the size of the Procyxian Neo-atom?"

Reeber nodded.

You understand what a positively charged graviton does?"

"It attracts," Reeber said evenly. "Positive gravity attracts."

"Quite so. Then you understand what a negatively charged graviton does?" He waited from some response from Reeber, then finally went on. "Yes, well it repels, you see."

"You know that pluridium has the ability to absorb any particle, energy or force pumped into it, focus it along its seven dimensions and eject, into the continuum again, any other particle, energy or force we choose?

"Yes."

"The Vanguards are made of pure pluridium. Combined, they comprise the largest collection of that element in the universe. Using the sophisticated computer systems on board the Vanguards, we have learned to create within them an abundance of negative gravitons. We will gather the incredible light levels from Procyx itself and, out of that light, make negative gravitons, amplify them, and direct them into a narrow, highly intense beam back at Procyx. Each of the twelve Vanguards will be pouring incredible levels of negative gravitons into Procyx. We have every reason to believe it will behave just as the Neo-atom did--the one you just saw in the model."

"Oh," Reeber said, nodding without the slightest hint of commitment way or another. "Hmmm."

"What?" Hastings was on his feet. "What is it? What's wrong? What can you see that fifteen thousand of the top physicists in the Galaxy cannot?"

Melana put a gentle, restraining hand on Reeber's arm. He pulled himself away from shouting back at this man.

"It's just," Reeber said after a few moments, "well--could you tell me more about the modeling program you have used?"

"It is the Gelding Mark Eight--the most advanced modeling program ever constructed. It can only run on the hyper-computers here at Polyphemus. Its creation took nearly a decade of solid, creative computer directed design and nearly half a century of field testing and results confirmation."

"The Gelding Mark Eight was used in the modeling that led to the establishment of Gelding's Limit. It has accurately predicted which stars in the Galaxy would go into Hypermotility with an efficiency rating of better than ninety-nine percent, making it responsible for the safe evacuation of many planets and the saving of trillions of lives."

"Further, it has at its disposal the most complete collection of physical data on Procyx of any system in the Galaxy. It has proven its abilities a hundred times over!"

Reeber raised his hands in a kind gesture of restraint.

"Those *are* impressive credentials. Thank you. I see."

Pause.

"But you still have a problem?"

"A concern," Reeber said. "Just a concern."

The silence in the room was thick. Reeber could almost taste the sense of waiting.

"Forgive me," Reeber shrugged. "It's only that the data you have just barely collected is so--so new. We still understand so little about the Procyx phenomenon . . ."

"I beg to disagree!"

"Sir," Reeber exploded. "Tell me--what causes Hypermotility?"

Hastings laughed once. "What?"

"What physical phenomenon causes Hypermotility?"

"Procyx. The intrusion of its universe upon ours through hyperspace."

"I asked that poorly," Reeber said. "Let me try again. What forces from the universe of Procyx, intruding through hyperspace, cause Hypermotility in our universe?"

"I don't see what you're driving at." Hastings said.

"Sure he doesn't," Melana whispered.

"Let me be more specific. Is it electromagnetism, magnetism--the strong force--the weak force? What causes our atoms to behave and break up the way they do?"

"You know perfectly well that the light from Procyx is purely coherent. It is one frequency of light only. With no spectra to help us decipher the chemical or atomic processes going on, we can know nothing about the physical laws of that universe--or rather, what is going on within Procyx. Watching what happens when matter from our universe is exposed to Procyxian space can, however, tell us everything we need to know in order to counteract those influences."

"But we really don't know what the actual, specific mechanisms are--is that correct?"

"Good grief, man! How can we? Even so, we still have enough information to clearly reveal the best course of action available to us!"

Reeber hesitated. "Sir, answer me this. Have you been able to test the highly likely results suggested by the modeling program on Procyxian Neo-matter in actuality?"

"That sample of space we discussed became far too unstable to do that safely. You do recall me saying that earlier, or were you, perhaps, distracted?" Reeber saw that Hastings' eyes shifted to Melana. The inference would have been obvious to a child. Melana stiffened and Reeber, struggling with himself on how to respond to such a cheap shot, finally decided to respond by not responding.

"The Vanguard Elijah is in that region of space now--waiting, is it not? Could it not select a small target of Procyxian Neo-matter, bombard it with negatively charged gravitons and record the results?"

There was a murmur of consent across the room.

"I do not see the need!" Hastings burst out. "The Gelding Mark Eight has never been wrong."

"Except less than one percent of the time," Reeber put in.

"You fool! That error was the result of incomplete data!"

"Exactly my point!" Reeber strode away from the door to stand in the center of the amphitheater. "None of us, no matter how brilliant--no matter how educated, can guarantee that the plan proposed by the computer will work, for we can only surmise the results by extrapolation and inferred behavior. That is often a perfectly acceptable method for studying the universe when you can't directly measure phenomenon. But it is not infallible."

"Procyx is an alien phenomenon--so different from anything we have ever seen anywhere in our universe that I believe it requires special attention in this regard--special treatment."

"And you feel that we have not done that?" Hastings came quickly down the stairs to confront Reeber. "Grief, man, don't you recall the Procyx Probe disasters? We can't get near enough to Procyx to experiment on it directly!"

"But the program to create and focus negative gravitons is already in place aboard the Elijah. Can't it be tested now? The Vanguards have defense mechanisms that should protect them from even the worst disasters. Is that not so?"

Again, a murmur of consent rippled about the room.

Twice, Hastings looked as if he were going to speak, but each time he hesitated. Reeber

pressed ahead.

"Let me ask one final question. Has the Gelding Mark Eight predicted a scenario if the plan it, itself, has devised should fail?"

"*The plan will work!*" Hastings said

"I have every hope that it will!" Reeber answered. "But if it fails, is there a possibility of destructive repercussions?"

"Enough! Gentlemen," Collins' voice interrupted. "Please, enough.

"Master Hastings, please take your seat." Hastings gave Reeber an awful glare, then turned and walked back up the steps to his tier. "Doctor Reeber," Collins continued. "We have permitted your objections here in the spirit of cross-cultural Academia. But in as much as your area of expertise lies in other areas of study and *not* physics, you are--don't take this wrong--not qualified to comment on, let alone question, the extensive work and study of Master Hastings' team composed of the Galaxy's top physicists. The least of his respected colleagues has more degrees, seats and fellowships than is generally considered possible in five lifetimes. It goes without saying that they are all geniuses. They have spent tireless hours, years, even decades of work on this project. With all due respect, Doctor Reeber, you are speaking in a vacuum."

Reeber flushed, but smiled, shrugging amiably. "No disrespect of their academic accomplishments was ever intended," he answered, his voice tight and at the edge of cracking. He turned and walked toward Melana. He did not want to look at her. He knew that if their eyes met, he would not be able to control the rage of shame, anger and humiliation that all but shook his entire frame.

"Curse me," he whispered to himself. "I should have kept quiet!"

"This course of action," Collins continued, "if successful, will end the horrifying destructions of Procyx. Time *is* growing terribly short. You see the Gelding Mark Eight has only recently predicted a staggering new phase of destructive power in Procyx-related disasters. If Procyx continues its existence unchecked, within a month's time, the number of stars and star systems destroyed by Hypermotility will have increased to seven hundred plus star systems each day."

There was a startled reaction from the group.

"We cannot evacuate all of the worlds that will be affected. We simply do not have the resources.

"Doctor Reeber--we share your reservations, though not, perhaps, to the same degree. These *are* desperate times. The end of our Galaxy and ultimately the entire universe is upon us. Desperate times require desperate measures. Surely, you can see that."

Reeber was still reeling from the announcement of seven hundred star systems a day falling to Hypermotility. He lowered his head.

"You do understand?" Collins persisted.

Reeber looked up and saw Hastings looking at him. He could not read his expression entirely. There was tiredness there, anger, pride, resentment, contempt--and yet something that somehow blunted all of these. Was it the weight of responsibility? If Hastings was wrong, what would it do to the man?

"Please sir," Reeber found himself saying. "Ladies and gentlemen--I only want what is best."

"Exactly," Collins answered, warm--fatherly--slippery. "As do we all." He turned to the group. "Now I ask all, shall we not proceed?"

As Reeber's eyes moved across the tiers, he saw some that felt as he did, but none were disposed to speak up. After no reservations were voiced, Collins smiled. "Excellent. We have Master of Doctors Hastings to thank for his tireless work. Master Hastings, we give credit to you, and you

alone, for this bold and inventive solution to the Procyx problem."

Reeber looked up in amazement--first at Collins, then at Hastings. "What a jerk!" he whispered. Reeber's objections must have carried some credibility with Collins--enough for him to make such a loaded statement. Collins had just, publicly, assigned full responsibility for the graviton solution to Hastings. If it succeeded, then Hastings would be honored and Collins would be credited with having the wisdom to see Hastings' brilliance. If the graviton solution failed--well, it was Hastings' fault. He would be viewed as a zealot who had been sloppy, albeit it sincere; conning himself, his research team--even a trusting, academic community by massaging the data and using a modeling program to find his solution without ever actually conducting any field tests.

It did not escape Reeber's attention that if the graviton solution failed, he, Reeber, *could* be recognized -- at least by this group -- for having seen the fatal flaw.

Hastings grew pale, but smiled. The implications were, obviously, not lost on him. Now Reeber found himself feeling sorry for the man.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," Collins stood. "I have just been informed that the Mestrate specialist brought in by the Cygnus has suffered . . ." Here, Collins hesitated, then went on. " . . . An unusually intense adjustment upon entering Polyphemus for the first time."

Reeber glanced over at the Lady Portia who gazed at him without interest, then casually looked over at Collins.

"I believe that we truly need her with us to fully assess the material that Dr. Reeber has brought to us. The woman's condition is such that she is not expected to be ready for any sort of work before tomorrow. That, coupled with the lateness of the hour, leads me to adjourn until tomorrow morning. Thank you all."

Reeber turned to Melana. "Good. That will give me some time to do more studies."

The doors to the council room parted and two security guards walked up to the safe. Reeber went on. "I want to review Benjamin's notes."

The guards started moving the safe.

"Take it to Micah's tower," Melana told them. "Dr. Reeber will be staying there tonight."

"Sorry. Our orders are to take it into maximum security," the nearest guard said casually as the safe was taken away.

"Now just a minute," Reeber shoved his way after the safe. "Those objects are mine!"

"Is there a problem here?" Collins stepped up, holding up a hand in an ordering gesture to wait.

"The artifacts and my notes are inside," Reeber said with some difficulty--trying to remain calm, outwardly, at least. "I really--I just wanted to study them before I made my presentation tomorrow."

Collins gazed at him in silence for nearly a full minute. The Lady Portia stepped up next to him, regarding the scene coldly.

"Dr. Reeber," Collins finally smiled congenially. A small crowd was gathering around them, and Reeber could feel curious eyes resting upon him. He flushed nervously. Collins, apparently not wishing to make a scene, went on smoothly. "You do recall our discussion earlier today?"

"You mentioned some obscure law . . ."

"Forget the law for a minute." Collins interrupted. "Tell me, Dr. Reeber--are you an expert on Mhyrnian mythology?"

Reeber hesitated. "Well--no."

"Are you an expert on Mhyrnian culture or Mhyrnian history? Have you any degrees on alien religions, cultures or psychology?"

Reeber was about to speak when Collins answered for him.

"You don't--do you. Isn't your field Vanguard mythology and studies into the ancient Brotherhood of Light?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me--what do you plan to present tomorrow, beyond a report as to how the Mhyrnian artifacts came into your possession?"

Reeber flushed again. "I was going to demonstrate the artifacts."

"Yes. You showed me that today. Anyone can do it. What else were you going to present?"

"He didn't specifically ask me to review . . ." Reeber hesitated. "I . . . I mean, I . . . It's just that Dr. Coss entrusted me with the artifacts."

"Did he say he would retrieve them later?"

Reeber felt a terrible, sickening, slipping feeling weigh down upon him. The artifacts were only loaned to him--left with him, actually--for protection during the Mhyrnian uprising. Reeber stumbled for words. "I . . . Benjamin--Dr. Coss told me that when he returned--he had something important to share with me."

"And of course, Dr. Coss was killed in the Mhyrnian uprising."

"Why would he leave the artifacts with me unless I could help--somehow?" Reeber's voice trembled on the edge of pleading and anger. "I have his notes in here!"

"And have you ever looked at them since Dr. Coss' death?"

Reeber took a deep breath. "It's just that I--my own work has been so demanding . . ."

"Dr. Reeber," Collins put his arm around Reeber's shoulder. "No one would expect you to have done any differently than you've done. You have now delivered the artifacts to us. I assure you that tomorrow, beside yourself, we will have the foremost specialists in Mhyrnian culture and religion here. You can discover *with us*, whatever great secrets are held within the artifacts. Why you'll get a first hand account of the investigation. It's the least we can do for your admirable cooperation in this whole effort."

Reeber felt completely stumped. Everything inside him screamed to hold onto the artifacts--to not let them out of his sight, and yet Collins' logic was unimpeachable. He stood there in silence--anxious. *I don't know why, but I just can't let them go!* he said to himself. *Please--I need--please, help me!* Suddenly, he imagined he knew how a Mestrate student of his must have felt just days ago when he had tried to convince an immovable Clement Reeber that there really were such things as Vanguards. *I know, but I do need help! I must have help!* Somehow, he hoped that the voice he had heard inside his mind before--the one that had spoken to him and shown him visions upon entering Polyphemus--the one that had assured him that he must be steadfast now--especially now--Reeber, somehow hoped that that intelligence could hear him.

He had a sudden notion to look at the Lady Portia. When his eyes met hers, she looked terribly stricken--the color draining out of her face. Suddenly, he found himself speaking to her. It was almost as if he were not speaking, but as if someone else were speaking through him.

"Tell them," Reeber said. "Tell them all that the artifacts must remain with me."

The Lady Portia nearly answered. Instead, she clutched at her throat, almost as if she were terribly cold, then hurried from the room.

"Master Collins," Melana suddenly spoke. "Don't you find it odd that Dr. Coss did not leave the Mhyrn artifacts with one of his associate Mhyrnologists?"

"What?"

"I assumed you knew. There were at least three prominent Mhyrn specialists located at leading universities closer to Mhyrn than Dr. Reeber. Among them was a Master of Doctors Luacine

S. Clark, perhaps one of the foremost Mhyrnologists and a co-author with Dr. Coss on several papers dealing with the Mhyrnian notion of three End Stars.

"Doesn't it seem significant to you that Dr. Coss chose Dr. Reeber to keep the artifacts safe until he returned?"

Collins regarded Melana with a penetrating stare, as if he had not seen her before now. "But we cannot know what he intended to share with Dr. Reeber."

"Sir," Melana answered with a smooth calmness--reasoning but without any hint of condescension. "I believe the answer to that resides in Dr. Coss' notes. As a professional *academic* courtesy to Dr. Reeber, don't you believe he should be given the opportunity to discover *why* Dr. Coss left everything in his hands and his hands alone?"

Collins took a deep breath. "Well, normally, yes. But time is of the essence in this case."

"Agreed," Melana said. "Dr. Reeber only needs the artifacts and notes for one night--tonight. With the assistance of myself and," she looked around, "Master of Doctors Hastings, and others Dr. Reeber may wish to gather, I am convinced he can find the answers Dr. Coss intended that he should find."

"Well . . ."

"If we fail--we fail. Nothing will have been lost, and tomorrow, we will all try to unfold the mystery of the Mhyrn artifacts together."

Collins looked around, as if searching for someone. Somehow Reeber knew. He was trying to find the Lady Portia. But she was gone. Reeber started to speak, but Melana gently, firmly restrained him.

At last, obviously uneasy, Collins smiled. "How can I deny such a logical, skillfully crafted request? Dr. Reeber, you have possession until tomorrow's meeting at ten." He turned to Hastings. "Tybald, I believe the lady's suggestion of you as a team member is most appropriate. You probably know more about Procyx than anyone alive. I would consider it a great, personal favor to me if you would assist Dr. Reeber in this."

Hastings showed obvious chagrin, then in the seconds of silence that followed, his expression changed. "Of course," he said finally. "Where should I meet you, Dr. Reeber?"

"Seven sharp," Melana answered. "In suite 1500 of the Micah complex. Please bring your notes--everything you have on Procyx."

"That will take some time to gather, but if I skip dinner, I should be able to make it."

"We will have dinner served at Dr. Reeber's suite at quarter past seven."

"Until tomorrow, then?" Collins said with a courtesy that was just a little over done. Melana smiled and took Reeber by the arm, moving him quickly away from the group. She turned suddenly to the guards who surrounded the floating safe. "You know the address. Please take it there now and remain with it until Dr. Reeber arrives." Then, without waiting for a reply, she coaxed Reeber out into the hallway.

Reeber hurried along in silence, regaining his shoes and putting them on in a hop hobble as they left the huge, emerald edifice. Melana continued to hustle him along urgently until they were well down one of the thoroughfares that led to the central parkway where she and Reeber had landed that morning.

Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer.

"What in blazes happened?" he said. Melana looked around them, then slowed to a more leisurely pace. "I wanted to get you out of there before Collins changed his mind."

"No kidding!" Reeber said. "What I mean is, how did you do it? The artifacts were gone! I had lost them for sure."

Melana smiled. "There is a reason I was assigned to you. I didn't know what it was for sure until you arrived, and I saw how the Lady Portia treated you. Then, I spent all my time researching you, your work, and Benjamin Coss' work."

"I don't understand."

"Clement--I am a Mestrate. My gift is that of seeing lineage. But that is not my profession." She smiled. "I'm not just an attorney. I'm a professional negotiator."

The look on Reeber's face made her laugh once.

"Why do you think the Lady Portia didn't want me with you when you were in the council meeting?"

"I just . . . "

"While you're studying the Mhyrn artifacts, I'm going to look up that obscure law you mentioned. Now, before I drop you off at your suite, I want you to tell me what Collins said to you about custody of the artifacts--exactly."

I I

"Hold!" Reeber said. The read screen froze, and the page he was reading was only a fifth of the way through the first of seven volumes of notes from Coss. Reeber had an awful headache from his . . . how long had he been studying? He looked at the clock. It read 6:52. He had begun by having the computer search for any and all references to Vanguards, Ships of Light, Primoids -- the term used to describe Varn Mestre and his contemporaries -- and even the Brotherhood of Light.

Nothing.

He had then asked for any and all references to Procyx. The computer had returned with the following question:

PROCYX
  CHOOSE ONE:
    END STAR OF GENESIS
    END STAR OF GRIEF
   WINK OF THE END STAR
 END STAR OF JOY

    QUORUM OF THE WARRIORS
    THE HOLY MAN AND THE INFIDEL
    THE THREE LOST MASTERS
    DEEP TREASURES OF THE THREE
    MYTHOLOGY DESCRIBING THE END STAR:
      THE EYE THAT SEES
      HYMN OF THE EYE
      THE EYE OF ECHION (EYE OF THE PROCYX)
      ZORL, THE MAGNIFICENT
    WARS AGAINST THE DRAGON OF NIGHT
      DAWN ERA WARS:
        (SEE END STAR OF GENESIS)

THE CENTER OF FURIES
FORBIDDEN HALLS
THE DARK EMPIRE (SEE ANDRALIA)
PRISON AND PARADISE
THE DARK EYES
THE CITY OF LIGHT
THE END WARS
WARRIORS OF LIGHT
THE HOARD (SEE WINK OF THE END STAR)
RETURN OF THE ANCIENT ONES
BATTLE OF THE DEMONS
DESTRUCTION OF ECHION
THE LAST DARK EMPIRE
COUNCIL OF THE MASTERS
THE NEW GUARDIANS
THE GREAT SLEEP
HEAVENS OF GLORY (SEE END STAR OF JOY)

Reeber had sat staring at the read screen without the slightest notion of what any of these entries meant. So, next he had decided to begin skimming Coss' works--try to find something in them that might suggest a direction he could then instruct the computer to investigate.

The works Reeber had then studied covered transcriptions of interviews with Mhyrnians, as well as original videos. Coss had found that there were apparently levels or degrees of religious understanding. His interviews had shown that the common Mhyrnian had a basic knowledge of the myths, but no apparent understanding as to what they meant to daily life.

Above the common man stood the lowest level of clergy called the judges. Judges spent their time searching the written laws and traditions, trying to understand the original meanings. It was mostly an exercise in debate and rhetoric. Coss felt that his observations clearly showed that this lowest level of liturgical study had, ironically, been responsible for significant muddying of the original religious ideas over the thousands of centuries it had passed since their inception.

The next higher level kept and transcribed the ancient laws. There was no attempt by these priests to interpret what they preserved. Their only duty was the maintenance and pure continuation of the ancient secrets. These individuals were called Noblemen, and were divided into three priesthoods: The followers of Zorl; the followers of Kyrel; and the followers of The Master. Reeber had found it odd that The Master apparently had no name, but that he was the great Priest King who governed over and commanded both Zorl and Kyrel.

The highest level of liturgical power within each of the three priesthoods was called the Most High Noblemen. These were the most evasive of all. The myths claimed that Most High Noblemen were composed of a genetic line of oracles, gifted with incredible powers and abilities. It seemed that Coss had almost located one of these Most High Nobleman to the god Zorl, but his notes said that the man had apparently migrated to Ahrgol with his family. Coss had indicated a strong intention to leave Mhyrn, travel to Ahrgol and locate this Mhyrnian. Reeber noticed that that specific entry had been made a scant week before Coss had visited him on Perseus and only a month before Coss' death on Mhyrn.

Reeber sighed, stretched, then stood up. He surveyed the room. It was as plush a suite as he had ever occupied. A bank of state-of-the-art computer stations accompanied a multi-frequency

scanner waiting silently in the corner. Reeber went to the safe and gently removed the Coss artifacts. He carried them with a heightened sense of care. The fact that the orb was made of pluridium would have brought Reeber more than a hundred trillion credits, had he chosen to sell it. He was ashamed to admit that that realization *had* stirred his imagination on one occasion. Now, he was deeply relieved that he had never seriously entertained the notion. It enhanced the realization that by tomorrow morning he must forfeit all legal claim on it and the Coss stone. It lifted the value of these artifacts to priceless treasures.

He shook his head in self-reproach, not for the first time since the session in the green cathedral. Only now, as they slipped away, did he value them properly, and he cursed himself for having done nothing during the years they had sat, waiting in his safe. He placed them on the table with extreme care, then sat and looked at them.

He tried to see them as if he had never seen them before.

The stone was only a slab of igneous rock, but the orb was smooth and polished to the texture of chromium. There were inscriptions on it that, of course, he could not read. And at the very top of it a blue, star-shaped crystal--inset and dark.

As Reeber studied the orb now, he saw something he had never noticed before. The orb always seemed to stand perfectly upright. He picked it up and looked carefully at the bottom. It was rounded without the slightest hint of any flattening that might cause the orb to stand upright on its own. He wet his lips with his tongue and deliberately put the orb down on its side, then watched. The orb did nothing. It did not move or roll. It simply rested there, on its side.

A soft chime sounded. Reeber went to the door and opened it. There stood Hastings, holding several cases.

"Dr. Reeber." Hastings smiled with forced courtesy.

"Please, come in," Reeber said, stepping aside. Why, in the face of all reason, had Melana invited *him*? It was obvious, even to Reeber, that Hastings was, at best, hostile toward him, and at worst a spy for Collins.

"Shall we begin?" Hastings said, placing his case on the floor and looking with genuine interest at the artifacts.

Reeber nodded, returning to the table, almost defensively. Only then did he notice that the Coss sphere was standing upright again.

III

"What time is it?" Melana spoke into the air.

"A little after seven," her own voice answered from the walls. She sighed deeply, pushing back from her desk. There seemed to be no hope for Reeber keeping any sort of control over the artifacts. She stood up and automatically, without even thinking, picked up the folder the workstation had printed for her and propped it neatly beside the door.

"Call Clement. Let me speak to him."

Reeber's image appeared on her wall. "Where are you?" he pleaded softly.

Despite anything she could do, Melana felt a tugging, gnawing within her. She could barely stand to look at him without the intense, irrational longing for him threatening to destroy her concentration. In desperation, she forced herself to look beyond the heavy professor.

In the background, Hastings could be seen placing the Coss artifacts on a table-sized scanner.

He pushed at a few places on the countertop and the floating scanner shifted position. Hastings paused, absently checking the shocking styling of his beard. Reeber's face was pale. He and Melana regarded each other. Finally, she swallowed hard, forcing her voice into steadiness.

"Clement, I need more time," she said, sounding unnaturally calm to her own ears. She could see his eyes studying hers and she smiled with false encouragement. He hardly needed to hear bad news now.

"It doesn't look good, does it." Reeber smiled ironically. Melana laughed, then shook her head. It was pointless to try to hide anything from him. It was as though he could read everything in her. Still, she tried to encourage him.

"Initially, no. Clement--I have to have some time to think on this. Can you proceed without me for a while?"

Reeber hesitated, but his eyes betrayed his equally fervent desire to be with her and at the same time his equal frustration at that desire's power over him. At realizing that he was as much a slave of his love for her as she was a slave to her love for him, Melana felt a loosening of its suffocating grip upon her. It seemed that they were unified in everything, even in their sense of slavery.

Reeber managed to shrug bravely, making a surprisingly convincing smile.

"I promise I will come by ten," Melana smiled. "How are things working out with Master Hastings?"

"Fine," Reeber said, but she could feel the tension even over the phone.

"I'll be there by nine!" she said with an eagerness that was both real and resented because she felt a slave to it.

An interval of silence passed. In that silence there were countless exchanges of knowing, unspoken expressions of encouragement, sympathy, and even a shared sorrow at all the disappointments of life. They exchanged anxieties of having no control over their own destiny. They shared feelings of not having enough time and, deep below the surface -- in a way that no one really spoke of much -- the realization that Procyx might well have its way and destroy the entire universe, including one Clement Reeber and one Melana Thorl. They shared more moments of silent bitterness at the strange, cold irony that they should only now be meeting. They grieved that years of both their lives had passed without knowing each other, that only now had they met when they might do some good, not only for human kind, but also for each other in the most personal ways. Now the very doors that had made that good possible seemed to be closing on them, shutting them away in darkness.

"Don't forget your experience upon entering Polyphemus," Melana said finally. "It was no fluke. It happened for a reason."

Reeber nodded. She could see that recalling that event served to return things to a more proper perspective, for both of them.

"If that had happened any other time than during a crisis like this, it would set things on end." She smiled. "But everyone's too busy coping with the end of the world to notice, and most of the ones who *do* know about it are denying it. Perhaps it's best this way. Maybe it will, in the end, serve us."

"See you at nine?" Reeber asked, obviously more at ease and self-confident. Melana shared that sudden flood of release in herself--a flood of lightness--of well being; a feeling that, somehow, everything *would* work out the way it should.

"Promptly," she smiled. He hung up, and the wall returned to its place.

The image of Reeber burned on and on in Melana's mind, like a fire-etched engraving that

even acid couldn't erase. She struggled to steady herself; struggled to push her obsession of him back, so she could think clearly. Nothing worked.

Frantically, she looked around her office, trying to find a distraction--any distraction. She made herself look at her diplomas--her awards and citations. Voraciously, she clamored for the strength of emotions the memorabilia had always held for her. She fought to remember specific things. She concentrated on trying to see her office afresh, as though she were coming into it for the first time.

It wasn't working!

She struggled to shake the power of Reeber's place inside her--relegate it to a more objective corner of her thoughts and desires so she could think clearly--so she could help him.

And then, mercifully, the memories she sought poured in upon her. As if for the first time, she felt all her youthful enthusiasms; her fears and her optimism; all her apprehensions and her unsullied idealism. She felt Reeber receding in her fixations and took several deep breaths grateful for the freedom, however brief it might turn out to be.

Without hesitating, she quickly stepped into her bathroom, changed into some loose, comfortable clothing and soon went outside.

Dusk had swept across the Old World. The orange sun had just set, and the single moon, the same side always facing the world in gravitational lock, stood as a waxing crescent in the western twilight.

Melana began to jog.

Stars were beginning to come out. The Old World sat just within the edge of the Eye of Polyphemus. During daylight hours, the wonders of The Eye glowed diffusely in a clear sky, flooding the world with nearly enough scattered illumination to rival the light of the Old World's dimming sun itself. Now that array of dazzling nebulae and accretion disks spread across the west and southern horizon like a hanging garden of shining gems and magnificent, swirled and glowing thunderheads.

There were, of course, other nebulae and black holes in the eastern sky. Even at the edge of the Eye of Polyphemus, the nebulae in fact surrounded the Old World. But on the night side, they thinned enough to reveal the regular, structured star patterns that extended five thousand light years in any direction, toward the inner surface of Polyphemus. They revealed their arrangements in the darkening sky in a warmly, comforting, precise regularity. Their precision stood as constant reminder that Polyphemus had been built; that here, if no where else in this crumbling cosmos, order reigned and a wisdom which, even in its dullest shades, out shone even the most brilliant of modern scientific imaginings.

Melana jogged unnoticing--uncaring, into the first of the twelve, deeply forested parks that alternated with yet more distant city rings.

The air grew immediately cooler. Melana glanced back, regarding the imposing structure of emerald where the meeting with Reeber and the council had taken place. Tradition held that it and the other eleven great buildings clustering the center of the City were ancient temples of some immense power. Their libraries were priceless. Every whit of knowledge humanity and even the ancient builders of Polyphemus had ever amassed were stored, somewhere, within them. Who or what the buildings really were remained a mystery lost in a deeply remote past.

The great, green temple (calling it a temple somehow felt the most appropriate to Melana) fell far behind, now--ever more remote, disappearing gradually among the shadows of the trees. Yet even through the shadows, the temple seemed almost alive with its own, shining green magnificence. In the twilight, its glow whispered a dark energy or power that was neither evil nor sinister.

As she ran, Melana could see the path beneath her glowing dully some twenty paces before and behind her. It provided an illumination that was constant enough to see where to place her feet, but subtle enough to leave the beauty of the descending night undisturbed elsewhere around her.

Soon, Melana found herself dropping deeper and deeper into herself. She recalled, not for the first time, her own vision granted her by Polyphemus. There she had first seen Reeber—loved him from the perspective of years yet unlived and spanning a lifetime. She had recognized him immediately after they had transferred him to Polyphemus and she had been angry. She wasn't ready for this. Her career was just taking off, and *now* he comes?!

It was like an arranged marriage. How long had that archaic practice hidden in the dust of enlightenment? But here it was! And yet it was not exactly the same. Unlike the conditions of an arranged marriage, Melana already knew Reeber—already understood what was most important to him and shared those values down to the minutest detail. Already that promised rapport burned inside her. It was just that her life was no longer her own. She now had to deal with this man who was so in touch with her that she could have virtually no private thoughts from him when they were together. And ahead were the boys—the two boys she and Reeber would raise together—boys that were not their sons.

"Help me," she pleaded between the measured breaths of her exercise. As if in answer, the anxiety fell suddenly away and an inexplicable peace and resolution flooded up in its place. She ran, mercifully, effortlessly, enjoying the cool air--enjoying the feel of her muscles working in a rhythm that was both hypnotic and relaxing. Had she been reclining she could have fallen asleep, and yet, simultaneously, she was so vitally aware of everything around her that she suspected that if she focused deeply enough she might actually see into the very heart of matter and time themselves.

A fragrant breeze began to blow. Melana heard aspen whispering in the wind like some kind of feathery surf, and then she thought she could hear nightingales singing, far, far away.

The forest went on and on. The path, smooth and well kept, led her onward with its dull, cool light.

She began mulling recent things over yet again.

The law *was* plain. It was as plainly written, as precisely crafted a work of law as Melana had encountered. It stated that *all* Mhyrnian artifacts were, without exception, proprietary cultural treasures of Mhyrn, and that they were the undisputed possession of the Mhyrnian people. Any such artifacts found off world were to be given immediately to the highest-ranking Mhyrnian official available for immediate return to Mhyrn.

At Polyphemus, Merrimoor was the ranking Mhyrnian. He was the Mhyrnian ambassador. But it seemed he was more than just ambassador to Mhyrn. He was also one of the Seven Chiefs--the highest secular ruling body on Mhyrn. The artifacts would *have* to be given to him. Melana *had* tried to contact him, but could never get past a receptionist. He was on his way to the Old World even now. But as Reeber had told her, Collins had apparently taken steps to delay his arrival.

Reeber! Memories of his presence swept into her heart and mind like a flash flood, driving everything else out. She growled in renewed anger and despair. It was always the same. Despite every effort she could take, even a passing thought about Reeber drove everything from her mind but him.

And the odd thing was, she didn't know how she could love the man.

In an effort to find someone of her choosing who could share a special rapport, Melana had dated other men. It was a clear defiance of Polyphemus' revelation. Yet no one had ever interfered, not even Polyphemus. She had tried dating Mestrates who could read minds. Lots of them. But the Mestrates that were telepathic grew, somehow, more and more alike. She soon discovered that

they had their own sub culture--the mind readers. They lived off by themselves, trying to form some sort of collective, extended supermind. So far, all they had ever succeeded in doing was growing ever more alike, so that if you met one of them, and then later another, you could barely tell them apart. That sort of homogeneity was a boring dead end. What she and Reeber shared was unity and sovereignty, all at once. There was singleness of purpose, yes. But there was always freedom to be who Melana was and who Reeber was, for him.

She obsessed about Reeber, but she was still Melana. Knowing and feeling was shared all at once, without intrusion, without any unwanted imposition of the other's personality. It was as close to perfect unity of purpose and heart as Melana had ever heard or hoped.

It was ecstasy and slavery; both total freedom and utter bondage, all at once. Part of her craved it while part of her cursed it for its strangeness.

Melana was terrified that such complete intimacy had been thrust so soon upon her. She felt both immovably enslaved and at the same time utterly free. Most of all, for the first time in her life, Melana Thorl was not alone!

She ran faster and faster. The path led deeper and deeper into the darkness. Melana fled, her eyes stinging.

I V

Morse sat up, eyes wide and starkly awake. The wall opposite his bed opened out onto the galaxy, gliding below the massive Vanguard. He heard the deep, pulsing power of the White Drive engines opened up full. He closed his eyes again and saw the images of his dream lingering there with vivid clarity and all the accompanying feelings as strong as when he had dreamed them. He got up quickly. The urgency was undeniable. Immediately he began pulling on his uniform and spoke to the room.

"Bridge?"

"Sir?" the walls answered in the deep voice of Commander Melrose, Morse's second in command.

"Prepare a ship of Light for immediate launch. Mel, I want you to see to it personally. Strip down the armaments. I will need space to transport two, maybe three people besides myself."

"Any preference for the systems you want removed?"

"Keep full morphing and optical shapers. I'll need defensive systems, gravitational deflectors . . . and by all means I'll need full navigational hummers and records. Leave me three full Acrucian charges and comm links. Dump everything else."

There was a long silence.

"Well?" Morse sat, pulling on his boots. "What is it?"

"Except for the fighter's White Drive, shields and gravitational goodies, that will leave you little better off than a standard fighter, sir."

"Noted. Proceed."

"Yes, Sir."

There was not the slightest indication that the communication had ended. Morse stood, looking out at the galaxy, spreading its spiral arms before him like a twirled skirt of stars and glowing cloud.

The image of the Mhyrnian flashed into his mind again, every feature as vivid as with a

photograph. "Transport?"

"Yes, sir?" the walls replied.

"Phase me to the docking bay."

"Yes, Sir."

The dazzling green of phase shift took him and he found himself walking toward one of the dozen thousand Ships of Light that stood in battle-launch ready mode. He noted with some satisfaction that the bay was all but empty of people and botts, except for a single servicer that hovered over one of the Ships of Light. Its arms worked quickly and efficiently on the sleek fighter. Melrose, his second in command, stood beside the ship, watching a floating panel as it flashed figures and diagrams quickly across its face. The tall, muscular officer turned as Morse approached.

"Almost finished, sir."

"Good. Have you been able to locate where they've placed the Intentor?"

"I have asked for and received her address. She is already recovering on the Old World, in The Eye."

Morse nodded.

"I've got you the space you need, here. I've taken the liberty of installing three extra seats, along with lavatory and food facilities for each. I guessed that you would need at least a week's supply of food and liquids, so I put in two."

Morse smiled the smile of long, knowing friendship. "Good work, Mel. Thank you."

"And I was able to give you five Acrucian charges and still maintain one T-sword in full operation. I assumed you'd need forward coverage, so I kept that one operative. You still have full, multiple DSPA to a depth of point two five kilo-parsecs."

"Excellent. Excellent." Morse watched the service bott close the access hatches and float away. He then turned to his second in command once more.

"Mel, I don't know what all this is for. I had a dream just now."

"I picked it up, sir. I don't know why Polyphemus would speak to you and not the Lady Portia, but then, these are strange times."

Morse felt a sudden flood of admiration for Melrose. He had always been amazed by his second's ability to so work untiringly and efficiently on every project ever given to him. But what shone now was the man's incredible friendship and loyalty to him. Melrose was an interpreter. That was *his* Mestrate ability, and he had never been wrong on interpreting a dream.

"What does it mean?" Morse asked.

Melrose took deep breath. His eyes sparkled as he answered. "The end of Procyx. It's the key we've all been hoping for. Once you take off, you'll discover where to go to find the Mhyrnian you saw. You'll feel some difficulty--even guilt at asking him to accompany you, but you will be able to cope with that. He will come with you. He has been prepared to come with you. He even waits for you to come, though he does not know the time of your coming."

Morse nodded slowly, his lips pulled tightly together. "You have Command. I don't know when I will be back--or even if . . ."

Melrose smiled. "You'll be back, sir."

"Thanks," Morse said. "Follow orders."

Melrose's face sobered. "Of course, sir. To the letter."

"To the letter," Morse repeated.

"But not necessarily to the spirit, sir," the tall officer replied. "The Cygnus will see to that."

The service bott descended to within easy reach of the second officer. A small door suddenly opened, and Melrose reached inside, pulling out a firearm belt with spare energy packs clipped onto

it.

"An Acrucian blaster with enough spare E-packs to last you the rest of your life. I assume you want your biotranz activated?"

Morse nodded. "You never know." He took the belt and fastened it about his waist. Suddenly, within his mind, he heard distant voices that drifted in and out of hearing range. He stopped the reception down to a hundred kilometers. Instantly, silence returned inside his mind.

"Good luck at Procyx," Morse said, climbing into the cockpit of the Ship of Light. He looked at the controls he wanted to activate, and instantly they came to life. He expanded his consciousness to reach the outer-most limits of the fighter. He thought the engine to life and heard the incredibly potent white turbines begin their climb to power.

Morse looked at Melrose one last time. He smiled back at him, and inside his head Morse heard him tranz.

"I hope the Vanguards will survive. "

Morse felt a sudden heaviness descend on him. He felt like a deserter--even a coward, for leaving the Cygnus now. But he knew he must leave, even if he didn't know why. He tranzed an answer back.

"You think this mission we're on will fail?"

The roar of the engines reached its peak, then began to soften as the fighter's White Drive geared up to open itself across seven dimensions.

"It seems the solution lies behind us; not ahead; not yet."

The Ship of Light began to shine. Morse saw Melrose hold his hand up to the radiance. The air itself began to ionize and glow. Morse looked forward as a section of wall opened before him, revealing the dazzling core of the galaxy behind the Cygnus, drifting visibly, ever farther behind. The spray of brilliance from the black hole array of Polyphemus' Eye stabbed up against the blackness of intergalactic space like a fountain of light. Morse took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

The breadth and depths of seven dimensions began to appear about him. Below him, the spiral of the galaxy spread like an infinite diadem of brilliance. He saw the swirls of time eddies; the dark billows of gravity conglomerations; the sparkling nurseries of countless nebulae, stirring energies that could be seen beyond the limits of electromagnetism, gravity and time. Morse never ceased marveling at the nebulae. There was power there beyond anything in the natural universe. Here was the cradle of life, and the nebulae literally blazed with its vibrancy. He opened his eyes and saw Melrose, standing on the deck. The second officer gave him a short wave, then vanished in a green glisten.

Morse leapt into the void.

To be concluded in the May 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

Leave a message about this story.

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Peasants were expensive, especially when the relatives came out of the woodwork.

"Oh well, no harm done then. We'll just call for someone to come clean this up." The General nudged his horse with his heels and moved on.

An amused burble stopped him a few feet away. He dismounted and hurried to investigate.

The burble came from a baby in a basket set amongst the scrub near the ditch. A furtive, embarrassed glance under swaddling identified her as female. Another glance at her sticky face and errant black curls confirmed she would be no beauty. The General peeled her from the blankets with a wary expression. Two small bits of paper dropped out, along with a necklace of cut jewels arranged on a small leather band with a tiny belt-buckle instead of a clasp.

"Is she wet?" the Private said. "When they're wet, you have to change them. I've had four, and that's what my wife keeps telling me."

"Change them into what?" the General growled, eye-to-eye with the baby. She gave an uncomfortable burp of rapidly approaching indigestion.

They investigated the bits of paper. The first, a letter from a sister, claimed that although Manking was a reeking cesspool of iniquity, the three of them might work to provide some future for the baby. She invited them to come to the city, but not to expect too much of her since she was just one poor woman afflicted with a cough, stiffening of joints, rampant fevers, chills, scabs, and general malaise. Her address was neatly printed on the ragged paper.

The second note said simply; *Please look out for our missing sealyham.*

"Odd name for a baby," the General said.

At that point the young Missing Sealyham threw up.

After a quick tidying up, they proceeded with all haste toward Manking to deliver the baby to the aunt who would presumably care for her.

A small, fat, Sealyham terrier emerged from the grass at the side of the road to watch them go. The dog trundled over to the mess–formerly two tinkers–sniffed at them, whined, and wagged her tail. Finally, she lay down with the undiminished hope that the rubbish of human flesh would somehow re-animate itself and feed her.

* * *

"This baby belong to you?" The General thrust a small, crusty bundle at the woman who came to the door of the house on Penham-Wynek Lane.

"Certainly not," the Lady Orangia said.

Lady Orangia bore her spinsterhood well. She was of the sort quite proud to say at the end of their life they have had nothing to do with *men* or the nonsense such acquaintances lead to. She was not, technically, a Lady. At a certain point, women like Orangia were allowed to claim the title because people tolerated their eccentricities, finding life much easier if they addressed her by such a title. If they didn't, they endured a scathing glance that made them feel guilty all day about things they had done weeks ago and hardly given a second thought to.

The soldiers showed her the evidence in the form of her letter. She sighed, but did not soften her posture the slightest bit.

"There was an incident," the General said. "Wagon fell over, or something. Um. We found this by the side of the road. Note says her name on it. Everything that was in there is still in there," he added.

Thus Missing Sealyham arrived in the care of her aunt, who had expected two able-bodied adults to go with her. The circumstances did not bode well. And she was not a very pretty baby, so

Orangia could hardly show her off to the neighbors.

Yet what should probably be remembered later is that the Lady Orangia, despite her stiff joints on cold nights and general resentment for the inconvenience, dug up some old lullabies to sing in a gravelly voice, then took on extra mending work to pay for a wet-nurse. And, in those few relative hours of infancy, told Missing on at least three occasions, "Well, I suppose you're not so bad, although you're not very clever yet, are you?"

From Orangia, it was high praise.

Chapter One

Aunt Orangia's house had small glass windows that made the world seem made of frozen bubbles tinted slightly green. Missing sat in her room, looking out at the dusk over the city of Manking. She drew out the bit of paper she was writing on, completed the last line, and hid the poem for Penham-Wynek Lane in a box under the bed with her other secret things.

Penham-Wynek wasn't so much a street as an alley with delusions of grandeur. It wasn't the poorest street in Manking, but it certainly wasn't anywhere near grand. Its architects had displayed a distinct lack of inspiration in building it, except for the fact that all of its unremarkable houses leaned slightly to the left–more an oversight of foundation than any attempt at creativity. No tattered children could be found amusing themselves in puddles outside. The philosophy of the working folk was that if children really needed to play in something wet, they could amuse themselves down near the wharf.

Missing knew Manking's every corner and rooftop, felt its pulse and tides. It had been her enormous plaything as a child, and she had run its streets without a thought to her safety because her aunt had informed her about Noses, Knees, and Nether Regions early on. Her Aunt Orangia seemed to know a lot about men while never actually indulging in their presence. On nights when the moon rose like a pale continent over the sea, she would look out her window and count the tiny flickers of fire in each house, knowing who was home and what they were doing by how the rooms were lit. Few people could so easily notice the shifts of the city's rhythms, the subtlest rearrangement of shadows and smell that signified a slow but growing change, like the track of a slug across a leaf leaving behind wet saliva that dries into a brittle skin.

Because she had other thoughts on her mind, Missing disregarded this vague sense of unease that had begun to build up over the past few weeks, this slug-skin of trouble. She fingered the bit of paper and jeweled necklace she held onto in troubling times for solace.

Please look out for our missing sealyham, the well-worn scrap of paper said. She knew by this that her parents had loved her, having spent a small fortune in tinker's pay to provide her with the strange leather band and its cut gems. The band had never really fit. She once proposed it was meant as a bracelet, with its odd belt-clasp, but Aunt Orangia dashed that hope. "No," the woman told her. "The thing was meant to go around *something's* neck. Perhaps you were smaller just after you were born."

There was a knock on her door. Aunt Orangia stood like a post in the open doorway, all

severe angles and precise hair. One of the woman's itinerant cats had followed her upstairs, mauling the hem of her skirt. Her aunt had a soft spot for ragged neighborhood cats that she set out scraps for every morning. Though she declared them scavengers, worrying out loud about their diseases, Missing had heard her refer to them by names like Cotton, and Bunny, and for a specific one-eyed creature riddled with mange, Squint.

Orangia saw Missing sitting in the window, noted the worried expression in her eyes, and sighed.

"It isn't so terrible to be a person without independent means," her aunt said. "Women like us, Missing, must make our own way in the world, because no one will make way for us. Manking is a blind city, as I have always said."

"Yes, Aunt Orangia," Missing replied.

Manking, according to Aunt Orangia, had gotten its name from the men who had first conquered the brazenly heathen sheep that lingered in the meadows along the sea, and made their headman the king. The city had been ruled by a succession of men ever since.

In theory, at least.

Missing suspected it was actually women like her aunt who ran things, because no one she had ever met could, or would, refuse anything her aunt asked. Because of this she had just endured a long season of what her aunt called "coming out," which seemed to entail sitting in the dim parlors of the local working class, drinking oily tea and talking about the weather. Orangia had never risen very high in life, but she had had ambitions; if gentility would not come to her, then she would bring it to the lesser-bred whose status she shared. This amused the working women quite a bit.

Along with the coming out, Missing had been expected to see to her prospects. At the end of the season she had to agree with her aunt that she didn't really have any. She was not, as her aunt pointed out, appealingly designed. You couldn't quite describe her flatteringly. If she were that tall and *thin* she would have been willowy. If she were that round and *short* she would have been plump, or even pert. Except for a prodigious pair of thickly lashed green eyes, her face was really more precise than pretty. A tangle of hair gave the impression she was always in a hurry. That was about all that could be said of her without resorting to vaguely complimentary metaphors. As it was, people called her "Orangia's girl." There was a gesture implying largess that went with it that most people seemed to recognize.

To remedy the improbability of an immediate marriage, her aunt found her a job. Missing was slightly surprised to find she would go into the service of Esmariah Gasp. The woman's name was well-known, spoken of often in lowered voices, and on occasion solicited for help by the desperate–who came back from their interviews with her wealthy enough to pay the bills, but grumbling under their breaths about having sold their souls.

"When you meet with Esmariah tomorrow you must be on your best behavior. Don't quote poetry at her, and don't allude to books you've read. She has read many more than you, and they were probably more sensible than the ten-pennion novels you insist on toting about."

"Yes, Aunt Orangia," Missing said. Orangia was not the sort of woman one called "auntie."

"I thought teaching you to read and write would be helpful. If I had known you would take on this habit of writing *about* things, I never would have done so," Orangia went on.

Missing sighed, thinking of her poem. At seven years old, she wrote a story about a cat for her aunt to read. The woman kept it for two days, read it more than once, then gave it back without a word of derision. From that Missing got the idea that she possessed a talented literary persuasion and strove for years to develop it–alone, in her room, with the door closed. She wanted to make something marvelous of the words she came across and wrote down in long lists on scraps

of anything that would hold the stain of ink: paper, the posts of her bed-frame, an out-grown apron. She fondled the words on her tongue like strange candy, reciting them as her prayers when prayers seemed too pale.

Auric…ominous…umbrous…

Bascule…balustrade…bon mot…

Palanquin…parsimonious…palaver…

But after a while the words seemed to go stale on the page, and the most she could come up with were a few bald rhymes she never really liked.

Her aunt moved into the room, filling it up with disapproval.

"And wear your clean shirt," she added. "Having employment is a big change, hopefully for the better. You should look prepared."

"Yes, Aunt Orangia," Missing said, then turned back to the window. She didn't like change. Change smelled like inconvenience. She preferred the predictable march of days–the comfort of routine. When the cat of inconvenience dug around in the sands of her hourglass, she just ended up feeling dumped upon.

Her aunt raised her hand as if to lay it on the girl's head. Then she hesitated, and lowered it again with a frown.

Orangia had taught Missing how to read, and write. Orangia had taught her of numbers and shapes, of how to mend a tear with precise stitches. She had weathered Missing's curiosity, gave her truthful answers to most of what she asked, took her on brisk walks, and showed her how to cut the mold off the bread when times were lean. It was Orangia to whom Missing had run with all her scraped knees and splinters, with the news of new kittens, with her theories of why it rained and where grass came from, and how she had spied the girl up the street kissing the smith's son in the alley.

Orangia had stopped up runny noses, soothed upset stomachs, and engaged in all of the physically intimate and necessary contacts required when raising a child. Yet she could not bring herself to this one act of fondness, this briefest touch of affection. It just was not in her nature. To make up for it, she spoke.

"You're becoming a fairly clever girl, Missing. I believe if you apply yourself, you may go far in Esmariah's employ."

"Yes, Aunt Orangia," Missing replied. Then she added, in a sudden fit of emotional pique, "I love you Aunt Orangia."

Orangia suddenly found that she had nothing to do with her hands, and no convenient pockets to stuff them into.

"Well," she said, feeling the slow heat of an unwelcome blush. "That's neither here nor there. The *clean* shirt, Missing." Then she went and had to scrub the kitchen floor for a while, to do away with the sudden desire to voice some insensible expressions of affection.

* * *

The Gasp House brooded on a small rise in the northern quarter of Manking. Esmariah did not rule but rather *maneuvered* the entire northern portion of the city. Her family had done this for generations since the Sealyham sisters of Alcaster relocated to Manking, married and–to counteract the boredom of breeding small dogs–engaged in a vicious war of commerce with one another. Two branches of the family took a hold on Manking and did not let go. Another branch kept the Sealyham name but left the city decades earlier to pursue a more pastoral life somewhere to the west.

Her property was walled and gated, although the gate lay unlocked and unguarded. The idea seemed to be that if you were foolish enough to go into Esmariah Gasp's house without an invitation, you deserved whatever you got. The house had been built upon over time by men with grand dreams, only none of them dreamed in the same style of architecture. Its ancient stones were furred with a cancer of lichen. This persistent little fungus had ganged up on the more prestigious ivy, devoured it, then left its tattered carcass on the walls as a stern warning to any other vegetation that might have some plans of cluttering up the place with greenery.

Its lawn was neat and sparse. Most of it was occupied by a wide, gravel drive. The raking of the enormous gravel drive was undertaken every morning just before dawn by a man named Utter Riley. Utter Riley was rumored to be three thousand years old, but in actuality was only forty-two and had not aged well. He regarded life in general as an enormous inconvenience, believed the human race to be mostly full of idiots, and didn't get out much. His job titles in the house of Gasp included Cook, Gardener, Butler, Raker of the Drive, and Cleaner of Privies. The other jobs he performed had no such glamorous titles.

As soon as she trespassed the drive, Missing found herself confronted by a small, bent man wielding a large wooden rake. His clothing was spotted and his trousers, in anticipation of any upcoming floods, fell about four inches short of his ankles. He had very little hair on his head. Most of it seemed to have migrated down to his chin at some point, except a few tufts that had gotten trapped in his ears during the exodus. The beard was patchy and used as extra storage for meal tidbits.

"I just raked that," the gardener said through his teeth.

Missing looked down at the drive. "It looks very nice."

"Ought to know better than to walk across a man's newly raked drive," Utter told her.

She raised her eyebrow. "But the grass doesn't go all the way to the front door."

Utter didn't flinch. This sort of metaphysical problem did not concern him. "Well, if you *got* to walk on it, walk to the side where it don't show."

Missing gave him a weak smile and continued on toward the house, walking carefully along the edge of the drive. When she eventually had to cross it, she did so guiltily, trying to leave as little impression as possible. It occurred to her this was not the most auspicious beginning for her new career. Glancing up, she caught sight of a face in a window. The face disappeared behind a curtain. With a slight sense of unease, Missing knocked on the door.

"Just go in!" yelled Utter Riley, Doorman. "I'm busy with the drive!"

* * *

Esmariah Gasp stood nearly seven feet tall and was by no means willowy. Indeed, the gods of flesh had grinned upon her. She appeared to have sprung up from the earth and allowed it to hang on her in generous mounds. Missing's eyes widened. For a moment she thought Esmariah Gasp was a statue, and hoped she would not be expected to dust it. Then her new employer spoke.

"*You* are Missing Sealyham?"

If a rogue wind had been available, it would have blown across the hall and chilled Missing. She knew of this woman only by reputation–for some reason that reputation had never included an accurate description. She could see why now. It was hard to put a woman like Esmariah Gasp into words that wouldn't frighten children. In the acerbic precision of her cinder-colored hair, and the subterranean murmur of her voice, there was an indication that her design was more elemental than excessive--she was her own small, continental shift.

"Ur," Missing said.

"Your aunt led me to believe you were clever." Esmariah Gasp pursed her lips.

"I–I can sew," Missing said.

"I have Utter Riley for that," Esmariah told her, then waited for a more clever response.

Missing did not have one. She found her tongue suddenly bereft of any ability to translate the messages that came from her brain. The two stood looking at each other.

"You seem to walk well enough," Esmariah finally spoke. "You may deliver this to the Sulk House. You will bring me a reply by lunchtime, which will be potato soup and bread. We do not waste pennions on frills here."

She moved to hand a sealed letter to Missing, and it was like watching a large portion of the earth readjust itself.

Missing nodded, pocketed the letter, swallowed audibly, and left again. She was so overwhelmed by the experience she wandered straight down the middle of the drive and out of the gate toward southern Manking where the Sulk House lay. In her wake Utter Riley threw down his rake, threw up his hands, and stormed indoors to polish something.

The Lady Gasp watched Missing from the window with a frown. She was not a woman who did anything without a very good reason. She certainly had not needed a house-girl, and wasn't quite sure what to do with this one. Her Aunt was not aware of it, but Esmariah had actually set in motion several small events, including some fictional gossip, which led Orangia to *believe* Esmariah needed a house-girl. This was because Esmariah had known about Missing Sealyham for a very long time and wanted the girl within easy grasp as she matured.

Manking lay situated on top of an extensive labyrinth of salt mines. It was something of a modern-day marvel that the city did sit, and had not yet sunk. Its builders ignored the relative danger of building a city on top of mines, then situated the whole thing right next to the sea as well. The sea had actually done more damage than the mines. Manking was becoming distinctly thinner. Currently the right side of the city was busily engaged in relocating itself away from the encroaching sea, while the land under it was busily engaged in becoming part of it again.

Esmariah Gasp owned one-third of the salt mines under Manking. The Sulks–also part of the Sealyham family tree, although in some people's opinion a faulty branch that needed trimming–owned another. The final portion was run by solicitors on behalf of the elusive Sealyhams in the west. That was currently the only third of the mines not threatened by flooding from the encroaching sea.

* * *

Aunt Orangia had not told her just what sort of employ she was to provide. Missing found it a little hard not to be disappointed. In her imagination–fed by the legends of Esmariah Gasp–she had conjured up visions of something along the lines of "Lady's Lady." Or even secretary. For one wild moment she had allowed herself to linger on thoughts of initiation into a secret society of thieves and cutthroats Esmariah ran from her home under the brilliant disguise of Ordinary Citizen.

There wasn't really much one could say at the end of a career about having been Official Household Walker. She wasn't much impressed by her first glimpse of the inside of the house, either. Rumors of the Gasps had veered toward certain descriptions of excess–gold-plated things, velvet settings, and inlaid floors. All she had seen was an empty hall with ordinary flagstones and two pillars that looked as if someone had had a go at them with an inexpert pick, cutting deep scars in the dark wood that gleamed a fresh and sickly ochre.

The quickest path to the Sulk House lay through the Shunts, a street over from Penham-Wynek, a risky route because people did not always end up where they thought they would when they came to the end of the Shunts. But the Shunts were part of that territory Missing ran as a child and a witch there told her once that "any child who makes it through the Shunts alive once is never fooled. They always know where it goes."

Nevertheless the Shunts were a mysterious place, even to some life-long denizens of Manking. It was a street, or collection of streets–no one was quite sure since they all seemed to run together–that on any outsider's map of Manking was not marked at all. Yet Missing had seen maps sold *in* the Shunts in which Manking appeared as an inconsequential speck in a long, winding maze clearly labeled with the name *Shunts*. The streets were inhabited by soothsayers and self-professed mages, palm-readers, merchants of oddities, oral hygienists, and other creatures called to the mysterious witchly arts.

Despite the foreboding nature of such a place, most of its shops were clean, airy, and open to business all times of the day or night. There was no offal in the streets–the witches had banded together to create a magical system of offal disposal that they called *gutters* and flushed clean with water once a day. There was the odd bunch of drying herbs to be seen in windows, but mostly the witches dealt in mustard plasters and soothing teas and the occasional bunion patch. The mystically inclined who came to Manking often visited there and more often than not left shaking their heads in bewildered self-doubt. Its witches were not crinkled or riddled with warts, but were rather a cheerful lot who had a penchant for wearing knitted scarves in varying shades of brown and green. Many of them supplemented their incomes by knitting tea cozies, doing alterations on ball gowns, and selling intriguing bits of powerless jewelry to tourists. One of the witches, an apple-cheeked woman called Ivy, called out to Missing as she passed.

"I've brewed a new batch of your aunt's remedy, Miss. Come by and spare a pennion for it later, eh? Give you a free muffin."

Ivy was a baker and brewer of tinctures, known for her Odd-Shaped Breads that helped with all manner of romantic complaints Missing wasn't quite familiar with yet. She was one of the only women Orangia viewed as an equal, and Missing had spent hours in the bakery as a child while the two women chatted. Ivy had a habit of laying her hand on Missing's head and leaving tattoos of flour there as if to pop her in the oven, bake her, and bring her out all new, and untouched.

Missing paused only long enough to wave. Her aunt *was* a little low on her remedy–a concoction of the foulest smelling still-liquor Missing had ever encountered. Orangia, a firm teetotaler, claimed that this tincture had nothing to do with drinking spirits. Anything that tasted that foul, she maintained, had to be medicinal.

At the end of the street, a watershed of ordinary people mixed briefly with the brine of dwarfish charm vendors and doe-eyed palmists. A young man Missing had never seen in the Shunts had set up shop on a rickety wooden table.

"Hair ointments," he said, pushing a scrape of brown hair out of his eyes. "Multiple remedies. Also, ask me about Manking's inevitable demise!"

He appeared to be about her age; still growing into his elbows and knees, wearing a long, blue robe inexpertly patched in several places. He had only one customer–a bald fellow who, by his blackened hands, was a smith. Missing thought the smith probably had too many strikes against him for a hair remedy, being a man so intimate with fire. For a moment her eyes caught on the boy's. He raised his eyebrows hopefully. Missing looked away, not wanting to encourage him.

"Coastal Erosion!" the boy called after her. "Natural occurrence or mystic comeuppance?"

Missing found her way safely out of the Shunts, managing not to look back once. Was it her

imagination, or had the boy been trying to catch her attention with his devious suggestions of erosion and demise?

She pushed the thoughts aside as she entered the High District. It was a place she did not visit often. Unlike the Shunts it was marked on every map, in red usually, with encouraging descriptions for tourists. In the High District Manking could get extraordinary things, for an extraordinary price. Rugs spun with gold. Scarves spun with gold. A lot of the wares in the High District associated themselves with gold. There were also improbably high-heeled shoes that Missing supposed someone wore somewhere, jewelry too heavy to be handled by a single neck or ear-lobe, and dresses so brief that even the mannequins in the shop windows seemed to blush at wearing them.

At the end of all this lay the Sulk House. It had a gate, well-guarded by men who managed to look efficient even after a nine-hour shift of standing around. They eyed Missing's letter, then waved her through.

Where the Gasp lawn was minimal, the Sulk lawn was excessive. Pruners and rakers and cutters abounded. The entire drive, suspiciously similar to the one at Esmariah's house, attempted to camouflage itself in what Missing was certain were intended to be brilliant works of topiary, but which actually all looked like lumpy bears. The Sulk house itself was pale and rose up in artfully arranged pillars and crenellations that were an asset to their single-minded creators. The front door was opened for her by a real Doorman, who blinked sleepily. Between them passed a glance of acknowledged servitude, though his said, "Yes, but I've been at it longer than you."

The interior hall of the Sulk House was everything the Gasp House lacked. Four pillars stood resplendent in gold. The floor was stone inlaid with other stone that was a different color and patterned. There was a small divan to one side, blue velvet, which by its long indentation had been recently occupied by a napping Doorman.

"Knock." He pointed to a large door to the right.

Missing knocked.

After a long wait, she knocked again, more firmly. A thunder of footsteps alerted her that someone was approaching. Too rapidly, it seemed, to stop at the door. Missing stepped back a little, awaiting the inevitable thud.

But the footsteps paused and the door, which Missing assumed by its height and thickness to be enormously heavy, was flung back on its hinges.

Erratic blonde hair framed a milky face, blue eyes, and gauche lips tinted perfectly rose. Missing had wanted to look like that all her life. The girl also stood about four inches shorter than her, another unfair twist of fate.

"Who're you?"

"Missing Sealyham." She considered curtseying, but had never been very good at it.

"What do you know about rickets?" the girl demanded.

"Not much." Missing frowned. "Do they come with scabs?"

"No, no, not the illness. *Rickets*. The game. With the sticks. And the three balls and the chicken, although it's much better if you've got a ferret."

"Oh. Nothing then, sorry."

The door slammed shut in her face. From inside Missing could hear the girl yelling. "No, *no* Dandy, you don't get to putter the chicken until *after* the balls have all gotten pocketed!" There was a pause. Then, "Because I *say* so!"

The door flew open again. The same girl stared out. "I'm Prudity Grumm. You can come in. But watch out for the chicken. She's laid something under the sofa."

Chapter Two

The room Missing entered was lavish with gold, glittering things, jeweled fabrics, and small but arresting knick-knacks of no redeeming value, layered on tables and window sills. Miniscule women wore alabaster gowns, smiling in frozen delight from the mantle. Small brass cats that her aunt would have appreciated poised to pounce on things they would never pounce upon. There were very few books, but some were layered artfully on decorative tables to show their spines and the gold-leafed titles of erudite works. Missing felt unfairly coarse and clumsy. She stood in the middle of the room to avoid knocking over something she might have to pay for later.

Prudity Grumm filled up the room, eyeing two innocent marble balls on the rug, with a mallet in her hand. A speckled chicken glared out from under a nearby divan. A small crowd of two other girls watched Prudity intently. They were similarly perfect, although pale versions of the girl they attended. They regarded Missing with a disinterested curiosity–as if she were just some new knick-knack to be placed on a shelf and dusted occasionally.

A young man sat on the divan. He seemed more interested in the plate of pastries in his lap than the game. The pastries did not appear to be a treat so much as a constant for him–he shoved them into his florid cheeks with a methodical precision. He was dressed in the traditional complicated crinolines of his status, with well-oiled curls and very small, very bored eyes.

"She'll be all day at this shot. Hello," said a soft voice at Missing's shoulder.

She turned and He was dark-haired. And He had Prudity's lush lips plus a dimpled chin and blue eyes that were gazing into her as if to set a flag on her soul. He was chiseled and fine, dressed in something darkly oblique, and He was…He was…

"My half-brother, Titus Sulk," Prudity said. Then she paused in her alignment of the shot. "I forgot who you are already."

"Missing Sealyham," she reminded the young woman. "I've come from Esmariah Gasp with a letter."

Prudity Grumm turned back to her game. The collection of girls around her immediately dismissed Missing.

"Now watch me," Prudity said. "What're my points Wendley?"

Wendley, on the couch, swallowed. "I wasn't keeping track," he said.

Prudity turned on him. "You're supposed to be keeping score, Wendley. I told you to keep score."

Wendley shrugged.

"It's very brave of you to come," said Titus, in a voice somehow reminiscent of honey and all things darkly sweet. "They don't like Gasps here much, although the prejudice doesn't extend to Gasp help, I'm sure."

Missing stared at him. He caught the edge of his lips up in a brief, encouraging smile.

"Yur," she said.

"You'll have to take your message to my Gran. She's the one who makes the decisions." Titus winked, charmingly. "Come with me. Want to come, Wendley?"

Wendley shrugged, taking in another pastry.

Titus led Missing back out into the hall, where he gave a little laugh. "Poor Wendley."

"Is he your brother?"

"Brother? No. He's Prudity's fiancé. Sometimes I'm not sure which one of them to feel sorrier for."

He led her through the next room and up a back flight of stairs, though if the stairs had led down and grown steadily warmer, she would have followed all the same. Eventually they reached a hallway, then a room. Missing supposed it had a door, and supposed he knocked as well, but she saw none of it. She saw instead the heels of his boots. They were the only part of him she could bear to gaze upon and not feel completely thick.

"It's all been arranged by the families, you see. Prudity tried to protest, but Wendley's parents wrote off to the queen, and she's making them go through with it. They're quite wealthy, but the family has no title. It never hurts to be associated with the Sulk name, I suppose, even though Pru is a Grumm." He stepped inward, holding the door for her.

They entered a large chamber done up much like that below but a bit washed out. In the presence of Titus Sulk all things seemed to pale. In the corner of the room was a chair. In the chair was a corpse. Its head was thrown back, its flesh cadaverously pale. White hair through which gray scalp showed was adorned with diamond-studded combs. The diamonds were yellowed and dusty. The corpse wore a fine gown corseted to such an extreme degree that the back of the chair was almost apparent through its spindly and sickeningly slender waist. It appeared to have no ribcage at all below the pendulous pricks of a bosom that hung down near its lap.

"She's not really my Grandmother," Titus told her. "She's my great-great-great-decades old Gran. She's the original Sulk, from the Sealyham side. They called her Eleganta once. She was something else entirely then. Fitchley?" He snapped his fingers.

A bundled figure Missing had taken to be a dozing lap dog at the corpse's feet leapt up and went to a small shelf nearby. From a crystal vase filled with water this person extracted a perfect set of teeth. It jigged lightly over to the corpse and slid the teeth upward into a gray-gummed mouth. There was the sound of a metallic catch.

The head lowered. The eyes became wet. The face of the dead thing looked at Missing, then slid past her completely.

"Gran," Titus said. "This girl's named Missing Sealyham. She's come from Esmariah Gasp."

Oh, how she hated being a *girl* just then!

Titus turned and, without a word of warning or intimacy, drew the letter from Missing's pocket. His hand touched her thigh, separated only by a breath of cloth. Her chest tightened.

Titus carried the letter to his grandmother. She glared at Missing.

"Sealyham?"

"No relation," Missing said. This was a common misunderstanding in Manking that she had to deal with from time to time. "My parents were tinkers from Delasbourg."

The old woman slid her eyes down to the note.

"Twelve percent," she said in a dry, used-up voice. She looked at her grandson, stretching her ancient flesh into something like a brief smile. Missing thought she heard the creak of tendons giving way. Then Eleganta gazed at her attendant. "Fitchley, I am tired. Clean my teeth."

With a twist of her tongue and the sharp retort of some unseen clasp, her teeth leapt from her jaw to land on the rug. Her head fell back with a snap and she was rendered cadaverous again. Fitchley pounced on the teeth. He proceeded to polish them with a small brush of blackened, splitting bristles, sitting spread-legged on the floor with his tongue between his teeth. His small eyes gleamed with delight.

Titus Sulk turned to Missing with a tight smile of revulsion. "Those are Gran's magic teeth," he murmured. "She bought three wishes from a witch in the Shunts when she was twenty-seven. Do you want to know what she wished for?"

Missing nodded.

"She wanted to be beautiful the rest of her life so she wished to live forever, to be thin, and have perfect teeth. She just forgot to mention the 'always beautiful' part."

Missing turned to stare at him, looking for some hint of teasing. There was a loathing in his expression that indicated he was not. She looked back at the old woman in the chair, and a shudder ran from her scalp to her toenails.

"That's your answer then," Titus Sulk told her. "I don't think Esmariah will like it much."

He led her back down by way of a much grander staircase and took each step downward with her. Back in the entry-hall he gazed at the sleeping door-man impatiently, then opened the front door himself to let her out.

"I hope she dislikes it enough to send you again," he whispered as she passed, then closed the door so quickly Missing wasn't certain she had heard him.

* * *

She wandered back down through the High District in a daze. Her quill hadn't seen light in quite a while, and her ink was mostly dried up, but she was certain she could find, *must* find some way of writing down the deep pools of his eyes…no, the limpid depths…no, the infinite gaze of two tunnels through moonlight…well, it would come to her. Something about Titus managed to circumnavigate all her sensibility and bore straight into the romantic nugget of her heart that she kept bound up most of the time.

She did not see the Shunts, though they saw her. Ivy watched Missing pass from her window. She glanced down at the handful of crumbs she had cast on the table-top to read, looked back at Missing, then shook her head with a worried frown.

The hair-tonic youth had relocated to the other end of the street so that Missing passed him again as she wandered out. He had a small crowd now and seemed to be having a successful go with his curatives. No one appeared interested in his warnings though, and he only called out once as she passed.

"Is trouble coming? Ask me about my runes!"

Missing shook her head to indicate that she had no interest in either. She barely spared him a glance, her mind's eye preoccupied with someone else just then. The boy on the corner, if she were to write about him, would be a brief sketch of elbows and small shelf of a nose, with earnest brown eyes–a waste of any metaphor that might be put to better use on Titus Sulk.

She returned to the Gasp House to find Utter Riley standing outside, glaring at one of the

windows and muttering to himself.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You've walked on my drive again, for one thing," he said. "And for another, *he's* here. He's no good, I told her time and again, but she will go on an' be independent that way."

"Who is it?"

But Utter stalked off, immersed in his own private dialogue. Missing went in curiously and found the door leading off the hall open. She didn't know whether or not she should announce herself, so she scuffed her shoes on the floor a little as she walked in.

Esmariah had settled into a chair near a large fireplace. The chair was so worn its cotton innards were emerging from various bald spots. The woman appeared to have reached some treaty with the chair. It bore her up staunchly, despite its seemingly inevitable collapse. Besides a divan and a leaning three-legged table, there was no other furniture in the room. Because there is an unwritten law somewhere that large people must own small pets, a dog of indeterminate breed sat on her lap, cheerfully ignoring an affliction of violently nervous trembles.

The divan was cluttered up by a man. He had to be tall, perhaps even taller than Esmariah, because while sitting his legs stretched out like the rigid tubers of some strange and spreading plant. Misshapen shoulders rose up around his ears, while his head dangled between them, swaying a bit. His face was more of a husk of flesh, his eyes heavily lidded but terribly bright. His nose dripped down between them like coagulated lard, his lips all one shade of old fish.

"This is my new house-girl," Esmariah told him. "Missing, my solicitor, Cadaberous Bray."

He nodded to her slowly, extinguishing the light of his eyes for a moment. When they rose again to her face they sparked with a dark and disquieting interest. He ran his tongue out along his lips, making a deposit to the unregarded dough of his own saliva in the corners.

"Well?" Esmariah demanded. "From all the shuffling in the hall I wonder if the walking isn't too difficult for you. What was the answer?"

"Twelve percent." Missing tore her eyes from Bray's.

"Twelve percent". Esmariah seemed to deflate a little. "Twelve percent is a pittance. For all the costs *I* would accrue mining the thing, they offer me twelve percent of the profits?"

"Their immediate costs to buy it from your cousins *would* be substantial," Bray told her in a disturbingly high voice. "Your mining costs would accrue over time."

"As they have for the past year," the woman muttered. "Look around you, Bray." She waved her hand at the bare room. "Do you see how my costs have accrued? My portion of the mine isn't under water yet. Why isn't there any salt coming out? You told me the thing would dig as long as I kept *paying*–"

She stopped abruptly and glared at Missing. "You may go have lunch now. Utter Riley is in the kitchen."

With that Missing was dismissed. She left the room and chose a hallway, since she had no idea where the kitchen was, vaguely aware she had heard something she shouldn't have.

As she wandered down the hall, noting its bare walls and empty plates where once candle-holders might have been attached, she turned the conversation over in her mind. Everyone knew the mines were in trouble. And she knew, as did everyone else, who owned them. Apparently, she reflected, Esmariah's portion was sufficiently threatened that the woman was looking to strike a bargain with the Sulks.

Missing's suspicion of direction led her to the back of the house, down a small side hall. From the scents coming from it, there was bound to be a kitchen. There was. Utter Riley was there, banging a pot down on a ragged wooden table with unnecessary force. Another pot, looking aged

and spotty, boiled over the fire in the hearth.

"He still here?"

"Yes," she said, understanding well his loathing of the man called Bray. "Is she–Esmariah–is she very poor?"

"Didn't used to be," Utter replied, handing her a paring knife and nodding toward a small pile of potatoes. Missing began to skin them.

"Used to be the Gasp family was fine, and Esmariah herself well–" his eyes gazed off into a corner for a moment. "There's a reason I came to work here, and it wasn't for the soup."

"What happened? Where did it all go?"

"It went to the mines," Esmariah replied from behind her. Missing turned and blushed guiltily, though she wasn't certain why. Somehow, the sight of the woman in the kitchen was all wrong–a large and valuable vase misplaced on a low and battered stool.

"I've sent Bray away Utter, so you can stop punishing the pots," she said. He just shrugged and laid out three bowls on the table. Missing added the potatoes to the boiling stew already occupied by carrots and herbs. She spied a salt-cellar to one side and took hold of it, sprinkling it liberally over the stew. As will sometimes happen, several grains escaped and fell on the hearthstone. Esmariah drew in her breath sharply.

"*Utter*."

But the man was already there, carefully picking up the grains by pressing his fingertips over them. He dusted them off into the soup, along with whatever else his fingertips might have picked up.

"'S'alright," he told Missing almost kindly as she stared. "Sometimes a few gets away. But we don't waste salt here, so mind you remember that."

For the rest of her life Missing remembered that.

Lunch was quiet and strange, shared by the three of them who didn't really have much to say to one another. Esmariah and Utter spoke of household concerns to one another in that familial language of half-utterances that the well-acquainted adopt. Afterwards there was cleaning up, and then an entire afternoon of polishing silver with Utter. He performed this task with enormous care, each piece that fell under his rag receiving a new gleam to rival stars.

"Soon be gone as well," he said as they finished, eyeing his work and his charges with regret. "The whole set's enough to bring in at least three gold Elects."

"I don't mean to be rude," Missing said, "but if you're selling the silver, how will Esmariah pay me?"

Utter shrugged. "I don't know. She'll find a way, I expect. Why, did you have a better offer somewhere else?"

Missing shook her head. It wasn't so bad anyway, even if she had to go a week or two without pay while Esmariah caught up or sold things. It gave her a place to go and something to do during the day, she supposed.

Lunch was the last she saw of Esmariah Gasp that day, and Utter let her go home before the sun had even set. When he escorted her to the gate, he motioned to the wooden rake, which he had set up against the wall nearby.

"Fer tomorrow morning," he told her. Missing nodded.

On her way back to Penham-Wynek lane, she remembered her aunt's remedy and diverted to the Shunts. The boy was still there. She had to admire his persistence. The crowd had grown even larger than before, but as she approached she got the distinct impression it was not a happy crowd. It may have been the dark glares aimed at the boy, or perhaps it was the large smith who had a hold of

his shirt front and was shaking him. The smith's head was still bald, but his *hands* were covered in a glossy new growth of auburn hair.

"It falls off in a few days," the boy protested. "*Then* it grows on your head."

"What about this?" An angry woman motioned to her face. It was a very pale but distinct shade of blue.

"When the color fades, the spots will go too," the boy explained.

"I think *you* need to go," the smith said, shaking him again for emphasis. "And we'll take our money back too."

The boy's face paled. "I–I used it to buy lunch."

By this time Missing had stepped closer, concerned. People in Manking had strange ideas about law. That there was one, and it was written down, made them feel safer. The actual implementation of that law–requiring formal charges and a court of peers–usually only struck them as a suggestion. And in cases like this a waste of time when a fist in the nose would do just as well.

The smith raised his to deliver the boy's sentence right then and there. Missing, though she could never quite understand why, chose that moment to implement one of Aunt Orangia's lessons. As the man's nose and knees were inconveniently positioned, she opted for the third spot of weakness. The smith went down with a sound that struggled mightily between a shriek and a groan.

That, technically, was where it started. The smith dropped the boy and Missing thought it a perfect opportunity to run. The boy, however, bent over the *smith* in concern. That was when the blue-faced woman hit him.

In the end, as the soldiers were hustling her away in shackles with the boy beside her, Missing reflected on the fact that she had never been in a fight. Since she had received only a few minor bruises, she decided she had done quite well. Except for the being thrown in prison part, which she knew her aunt would not be happy about at all.

* * *

They were put in two separate cells next to each other and told that their parents would be informed. Missing dutifully gave them her aunt's address.

"I'm sorry," the boy said politely, "but you'll have to contact mine in Western Pressing."

"Don't think we won't," one of the guards snapped.

"Well I didn't, actually. Think you wouldn't, that is. Um. What I mean to say is, I can give you the address if you like."

The guard stared at him, then stalked off, muttering to himself about disrespectful youngsters with low breeding and don't think they didn't have ways of getting the address if they wanted it.

Missing sat down on the rigid cot to wait, not really having much to say to the boy next door. Although she could acknowledge her own responsibility, she was a little frustrated that saving him had necessitated this incarceration. He did not appear interested in talking either.

Meanwhile, there was the suspicious sound of a mouse trying to get into the cell. Missing turned her head toward the far wall just in time to see a large portion of it detach itself and open inward. She sat up. A figure came through, accompanied by some scuffling and distinctly feminine shushings.

"Isn't this exciting?"

"I feel like an adventurer."

"I've got my hose stuck on something."

"Quiet! We have to be covert! We can't be covert if you keep–oh, buttons, I broke a nail."

The secret passageway, Missing assumed, was filled with an assortment of ninnies. What they were doing there was beyond her. She watched with interest as one stuck her head out into the cell. It was covered in a black, hooded mask made of satin, with little red flowers sewn around the edge. The eyes behind the mask were heavily made up especially for the occasion. Her black doublet was more of a short skirt with black lace trim and her boots, well, her boots weren't boots at all, they were immediate family to the sorts of shoes hawked in the High District. The figure chewed on one of her fingernails.

"We heard they had unjustly imprisoned a helpless woman of no substance in this cell in the name of an unfair and gender-biased patriarchal society that commits symbolic genocide of its women by oppressing and denying them their rights," the figure in black whispered. *"You her?"*

If by oppression she referred to the chains, they had been taken off and she had been given a salve and she *had* been kicking people at the time. Missing assumed chains to be a natural course of action and held no grudges.

"Um," she said. "Yes?"

"Good, come with uth," the figure lisped.

"Sorry?" Missing said.

"Thhhhhh, keep your voith down," the black crusader spat. *"And don't thay any etheth. The eth thound giveth away your whithperth."*

Suddenly Missing was hit with a thought. "Did you read that in Nancifela Drunicus, Princess Avenger?"

The figure straightened up and her eyes widened. "Oh yes, have you read it? It's my favorite book," she said in a normal tone. She looked hard at Missing. "Do I know you?"

"Who *are* you?" Missing asked.

"The Black Lotus of Revolutionary Ideas." The figure gave a sweeping curtsy. "Defender of weak, poor, and unjustly accused women. That's my team in the tunnel, the Ladies of Justified Feminist Outrage."

The two Ladies giggled and waved.

"Look, are you coming or not?" demanded the Black Lotus. She was still chewing on her fingernail.

Missing stared at her. "They know where I live. They'll just come and get me again."

"Oh, that's alright," the Lotus said. "We've got lots of safe houses. We'll move you around for a month or two, then smuggle you out of the city."

"What will I do then?"

"Well." The Dark Flower of Little Foresight nibbled at her fingernail. "You'll be free. You can do anything you want."

"But that's what I do now," Missing said. "And I don't think my Aunt would be very happy if I escaped from prison."

"My La-I mean, Black Lotus, someone's coming," someone hissed from the tunnel, distinctly pronouncing all her esses.

"I mutht go," the Lotus said. "Perhapth you will come to your thentheth after the mindleth puppeth of the tyrannical opprethorth have quethtioned you for a few hourth."

With that she whirled around and disappeared back into the tunnel. Missing saw she had had a small cape sewn onto the neck of her costume that swirled when she turned. As the wall closed again, Missing could hear more conversation.

"Isn't she coming?"

"No. She's been brainwashed by the system of oppression under which she was born and raised. She

doesn't know any better."

"Poor thing. I've got a candy in my pocket. Do you think she'll come for candy?"

"She's a woman, Iron Dandelion, not a puppy. She will just have to learn the hard way."

"Oh, I've torn my hose."

"That's the third pair this week, Poisonous Rose. Those hose aren't cheap, you know."

"Sorry. These tunnels are just so icky."

The wall closed.

"What was that all about?" the boy asked. Missing saw him standing over by the bars. She went to join him, and could just see the edge of his right cheek if she looked hard enough.

"I don't know," she said.

"Listen, I'm sorry about this," he told her. "I *told* them the remedies don't work right away."

"You might want to print that on the bottles next time."

"Right," he said. "Good idea. My name's Roger. I'm a wizard."

"I'm Missing," she replied, judiciously deciding not to voice her doubt that he was anything of the sort.

"No you're not, you're found," Roger said, then laughed. "Do you see? Missing? Found?"

"Oh yes." Missing sighed. "Very clever. I've *never* heard that one before."

"You might want to hold on to something," he said. She saw him sit down quickly.

"What?"

Suddenly she had to grab onto the bars of the cell, because there was the momentary but distinct sensation of the world tilting sharply to the left. It passed quickly, knocking a small amount of silt from the ceiling. Missing sat down. It was all she could think of to do.

"Right on time," Roger said. There was the sound of rummaging in pockets.

"What was it?" Missing gasped.

"I don't know, but it's very prompt." Roger stuck his hands out through the bars, dropping several items on the floor. "I've read it in the runes for months now. You see how the seventh ard always lands to the left of the ninth pell?"

Missing looked down at the floor. "Those are runes?"

"Yes."

"I never knew they looked so much like buttons."

"Ah." Roger's voice was embarrassed. "They are actually. When I was small I always played with my mother's sewing things and one day foresaw the birth of a new milking cow in them. I've used them ever since. You have to use what works, you know," he added.

"You saw this shaking in them?" Missing asked.

"Right. The runes started turning up funny a few months ago. All signs said I should go to Manking, so my parents gave me a little pocket money and here I am. Ever since I got here the runes have fallen *exactly* the same way *every* time I cast them, indicating an upset. Today was the first time I felt the tremors, though."

Missing eyed the perplexing arrangement of sewing accessories. "But you don't know what it is?"

"Not yet, but I think I'm getting close. It has something to do with something under the city–"

"Thus the ground shaking," she interrupted. Roger didn't seem to notice.

"And possibly something to do with the coastline as well," he finished.

She was about to ask more when a familiar voice from down the corridor stopped her. The voice demanded to see her.

"Oh," she said bleakly. "I think my aunt's here."

Chapter Three

"You can't just storm in here!" An arguing voice accompanied Orangia's approach down the prison hall. "If you want to see a prisoner you have to sign in!"

"Nonsense," Aunt Orangia said. "I'm not going to spirit her away."

"But there are formalities!"

Aunt Orangia appeared around the corner, unconcerned with the formalities. Behind her a plump, elderly man was doing his best to keep up with her pace. He had a face that would have been cheerfully rotund, if it weren't currently glaring at the woman, as well as a small, neat beard and full head of graying hair. Aunt Orangia whirled on him.

"Who are you?"

The man pulled up short and stuck out his chin. "I'm Morwin Croomb, Inquisitor. I'm in charge of this case. Now I ask the same of you, Madame."

Missing saw what the inquisitor did not. Her aunt's back shifted to rigid attention.

"Morwin Croomb," she said, as if testing the sound on her teeth. "*I* am Orangia Task."

The Inquisitor's eyes rounded. Missing saw his face twitch.

"Spring Coming-Out, about thirty-two years ago?" Croomb said.

Aunt Orangia barely moved her head. "You asked me to dance, then didn't."

He frowned. "Something distracted me."

"It was Lacinda Daily." Orangia's voice could have chilled a glacier.

"Ah." His eyes softened. "She had on a blue dress."

"So did *I*," Missing's aunt replied.

"She had Elvin ancestors," Croomb said. "You can't resist the charms."

"She *never* had Elvin *anything*," Aunt Orangia informed him.

"Her mother was romanced on a moonlit night by a pale-skinned man who walked through the town bewitching maidens with his song," Croomb said.

"*That* was Elbis Tharp," Orangia said. "He got drunk on his seventeenth birthday, took off all his clothes, and ran down the street singing "Wee Willy Winkle.'"

"Ah." There didn't seem much more for him to say.

"Indeed." Aunt Orangia nodded. She always had something more to say. "And have you had a pleasant life with Lacinda?"

"Ah ha, well." Croomb drew himself up a bit, gazing just past her ear. "We never–that is, she

and I–"

"Oh, yes, that's right," Aunt Orangia said. "Lacinda followed that gambler to Pasia and took up drinking where her father left off. I haven't seen her lately, but I've heard the drinking did *marvelous* things for her Elvin complexion."

"Ah. Hah. Well."

"Now," said Aunt Orangia. "Are you holding my niece for any particular reason?"

"There was a fight," Croomb said. "She kicked a fellow in the–" He cleared his throat.

"Good for her," Aunt Orangia said. "Now use your key, Morwin, and open that door."

He did so, looking confused as to why he was.

"Roger too, please," Missing said, seeing the boy's shoulders droop.

"Roger too," her aunt echoed.

Inquisitor Croomb opened Roger's cell.

"You'll have to fill out the paperwork," he told Orangia.

"*You* know who I am," she said. "*You* fill it out."

"I suppose it wouldn't be much trouble," he mumbled. He was trying very hard not to look at Missing's aunt, while trying very hard to take in her features.

"Ur. Nice to see you again, Orangia."

"Delightful," Aunt Orangia replied through her teeth, then with a sparse nod urged the two youngsters toward the door. Missing glanced back once to see a stunned but thoughtful expression cross Morwin Croomb's face as he watched her aunt leave.

Outside the building, Aunt Orangia turned on them.

"Now," her aunt said, in a voice not much warmer than the one she had accosted Croomb with. "Why don't you tell me just *what* you think you were doing, getting yourself thrown in prison?"

"It wasn't really my fault," Missing told her.

"Then whose was it?"

"Mine actually," Roger spoke up. "And I'm very sorry about the whole thing."

Aunt Orangia eyed him carefully while Missing held her breath. "I see. Well then, Roger, I suppose you will have to come along and explain yourself to me." She pursed her lips. "What's the matter with you? You look very pale. Are you ill? If it's contagious–"

"No," Roger interrupted. "I just haven't had a lot to eat in the past few days. Until today, no one wanted my remedies. And even that didn't work out very well."

Aunt Orangia made a small sound in her throat. "I suppose I can feed you." She shook her head. "Although I don't take in strays, so don't expect it to be an on-going occurrence."

Missing looked over at Roger, who seemed to find the idea of food interesting enough. Aunt Orangia believed very much in what she called her "charitable duties," practicing them on the needy often, whether they liked it or not.

"How was your first day of employment?" Aunt Orangia asked, as they towed Roger home for a feeding.

"A little strange," Missing said. "Did you know Esmariah Gasp doesn't have very much money?"

"You work for the Gasps?" Roger asked. She nodded. "That works out well," he said. "I think I need to get down into the mines to figure out about those tremors. Can you arrange something?"

"I only work for her," Missing reminded him. "It isn't as if I can just ask her that kind of thing."

"Why not?"

"Have you ever met Esmariah Gasp?"

He shook his head.

"That's why," she said.

"You appear to have overheard something about the Gasp House that isn't much of your business," Aunt Orangia broke in.

"I learned even more than that." Missing ignored the reproach, suspecting the curiosity underlying it. Aunt Orangia had a habit of framing questions as rebukes. "Her salt mine isn't doing well. She's selling off her silver to pay for it. She sent me to the Sulks with a letter and Eleganta Sulk said 'twelve percent' and it didn't make Esmariah very happy."

"Hmph. Sounds like Esmariah is trying to enlist Eleganta's help in buying out the Sealyham portion of the mine," Aunt Orangia said.

"That's what her solicitor, Mister Bray, said. He said Eleganta has to pay the bulk up front, and Esmariah's mining costs would accrue over time."

"The Sealyhams won't sell to the Sulks," Roger said. They turned to look at him. He shrugged. "At least that's what my parents told me. People say they don't really like the Sulks all that much."

"That isn't news. Those three families have been at war forever. Thank goodness it never had anything to do with us. Where do you come from, young Roger?" her aunt asked.

"Western Pressing."

"Were you associated with the Sealyhams at all?"

He shrugged again. That gesture, and the habitual swiping of hair from his eyes, seemed to be the ones he used most frequently. For some reason, both had begun to irritate Missing.

"They're fairly ordinary in Western Pressing. Not like the Gasps and Sulks are here," he said.

By the time they returned to the house, Roger had told Aunt Orangia the tale Missing heard in the prison. Aunt Orangia, on discovering he was renting a small room in the Shunts with no supervision whatsoever, advised him that he would come for meals in her house, morning and evening. That way she could at least make certain he did not starve to death. He would immediately write to inform his parents that he had been taken in by a hard-working woman of high morals and untarnished reputation. Yes, she replied, he could also tell them about Missing if he liked. Missing spoke up to inform them both she didn't care to be told about in anyone's letter to their parents. Roger gave her a perplexed glance.

As soon as they entered, Missing flounced upstairs to her room, slammed the door, and proceeded to engage in a good sulking. The addition of Roger to the household did not sit well with her. It all went back to her desire for routine. She and Aunt Orangia had a routine they followed every single day, and it suited her. Now it was going to be all pulled out of joint. Someone else in the house meant someone else to have to talk to, and maneuver around, and clean up after. Missing had a limited experience with boys, but she heard they were messy.

Except for Titus, of course, but he wasn't really in the "boy" category. Remembering him, Missing got out her quill, added a little water to her ink-well so that she had something sort of watery and gray to write with, and began her heart's work. By the time Aunt Orangia came to scold her for her behavior, she was well on her way to a marvelous little epic poem in which Titus figured heavily as a hero, a bard, a young prince, a stalwart, and a good many other improbable careers that were completely unrelated but rhymed well.

"What sort of behavior is that to greet a guest with?" Aunt Orangia demanded, not bothering to knock. Missing, immersed in the difficult task of describing Titus' eyes, looked up absently.

"Hmmm? Oh, that. I'm sorry Aunt Orangia. I just wasn't feeling very well," she said, not wanting to lose the thin but promising thread of "turgid oceans of meaningful something-or-other," in response to Titus' eyes.

"What are you writing about *now*?" Her aunt sighed.

"This?" She gazed down with a fond smile. "This will be my masterpiece."

Her aunt sniffed, then lingered. "This boy," she said. "He seems a very hard-working young man, if a little misdirected."

Missing murmured something acquiescent, not really listening.

"Western Pressing is a fairly large town. I've heard they do well there," her aunt went on. "It may be inconvenient for a while, but perhaps his parents will continue to send him money to cover his meals here, rather than at that rat-trap in the Shunts. We could use a few extra pennions, you know."

Again, Missing nodded. Was "turgid oceans of meaningful parody" too vague?

"There are other benefits to having a young man around the house," Orangia added. "What I am trying to say, Missing, is that having young Roger here may benefit the both of us, if we were to put some effort into it. What I am *trying* to say is that I am endeavoring to look out for your future welfare, if you understand my meaning."

"Thank you, Aunt Orangia," she said.

"When I say putting a little effort into it, I am implying that a nice, neat braid might not hurt once in a while," the woman added. "For dinner this evening, although it's late already."

"Braids make my ears hurt," Missing murmured the time-worn argument between them.

"Many things in life are painful. Making oneself presentable at the dinner table is the least of your worries."

"Yes, Aunt Orangia."

"So we understand one another?" Orangia pressed.

Missing looked up at her, suddenly aware that an entire conversation had passed and she may very well have agreed to something she would be expected to remember later. She met her aunt's eyes in an effort at sincerity.

"Yes, Aunt Orangia," she said. Her aunt nodded and left.

A few moments later, Missing went down to dinner without bothering to comb her hair or remembering to braid it. She was too immersed in lines of poetry to even notice her aunt's scathing glare throughout the meal. It wasn't a very interesting meal anyway. Roger attempted to entertain them with some jokes, which her aunt smiled thinly at. Half-way through the meal he got something green stuck in his front teeth, and Missing ended up staring at him as it flashed in and out of his smile.

* * *

Their morning routine was not interrupted too much; by the time Missing and her aunt rose, Roger had already come and gone. He left them a polite note to say he had taken a little cheese and some bread and would be back later that evening. He was off to mail the letter to his parents, to check his residence for their delivery of his boarding costs, and to look into something. He would bring money back with him when he returned for dinner.

"There," her aunt said. "You see? He's already gone off looking for work. It bodes well for him that he is an early riser."

"I suppose," Missing replied, and left for work.

That morning Utter Riley was nowhere to be seen, but she drew the wooden rake along behind her as she made her way up the drive, mindful of his warning. No one answered her knock, so she went in. There was also no answer to her calls. Missing stood in the front hall, uncertain as to what to do for a while, before she went looking. They were not in the side-room or the kitchen. She took a small, dark staircase from there to the second floor. From this point the Gasp House separated into two long wings, with the entry and the kitchen settled in the long part between them, like the curve of a gigantic "u". She heard noises from down the left wing and followed them to the open door of a room.

Utter Riley and Esmariah Gasp looked up as if they had completely forgotten about her, or not really expected her to return. The room looked like a parlor, with remnants of fine furniture and even some bric-a-brac. An enormous portrait of a long-dead, tern-faced Gasp glared down from over the marble mantelpiece. Utter Riley stood on a small ladder pulling gold candle-fixtures from the wall. Esmariah Gasp gathered up bric-a-brac, putting it in a large wooden wheelbarrow set in the middle of the room.

"Ah," she said. "Missing Sealyham. Today you will find anything that has a hint of gold and put it in this wheelbarrow. We will strip this room, as well as the next four to the right."

"How do I know if it's real gold or not?" Missing asked.

Esmariah gave her a withering glance. "In this house, it is *all* real," she said. Then she took up a small chisel from nearby, handing it to Missing. "Actually, you might be better put to work on the portrait of old Jahanesson Gasp. Utter will take it down for you." She motioned to the painting. "Be certain not to miss a flake of it."

Missing realized with horror that Esmariah meant to have her chisel off the gold from around the frame of the large painting. Surely the *paint* wasn't gold as well? Then she remembered the scar marks on the two pillars in the downstairs hall. She looked around her as Utter wrestled the portrait down. This room had once been fine and sunny, a place for people to meet, perhaps a lady's sitting room. Now there was a small but growing pile of its sweet accessories in the bottom of the wheelbarrow. Esmariah plucked another one from a shelf, a golden dog with doleful eyes and little jeweled paws and ears. She saw the woman rub the figurine with her thumb for a moment, then sigh quietly and put it in the barrow with the others.

Missing covered up the sudden sting of an inexplicable tear by sitting down and getting to work on the portrait frame. She really didn't know Esmariah well enough to like her or hate her yet. Yet she had grown up on legends of the Gasps and Sulks, of their finery and distinguished bloodlines. Though Esmariah's house surpassed her own in luxury, even without its rich façade, she knew the Gasps were "always good for a loan," according to local gossip. The northern end of Manking, far removed from the Sulks and the High District, viewed the reclusive Gasps with a sort of bemused awe. If you lived in the northern part of the city it was worth something to say you were just two streets over from the Gasps. It *meant* something to be from the Gasp end of town. The Gasp house was their own small castle, and the Gasp family their own little royalty.

Somehow this seemed monumentously tragic. She felt as if someone should know about what Esmariah was being forced to do to her home. But for the rest of the day–pausing only for lunch–it was only she, Utter Riley, and Esmariah Gasp who watched the pile of precious gold grow as they stripped the rooms literally down to the walls in silence. At the end of the day they stood back to view their handiwork, finding it sadly well done.

"Deliver that to Bray, as usual," Esmariah told Utter. He scowled, but nodded. "And all the furniture is to be sold, along with the silver downstairs."

Missing saw the ornery little man's shoulders droop. He took up the barrow and wheeled

it out, cursing and clunking it down the stairs. Esmariah sank down into one of the divans for a moment, then rose again as if she couldn't bear to feel its fine fabric. She moved to the window with a heaviness not due to her size and looked out.

"Do you know how many uses salt has?" she asked suddenly.

"Not really," Missing said.

"Thousands," the woman told her, still gazing outward. "Alchemists and physicians have found it to be a necessary part of the human and animal diet. In the deep southern jungles there are brightly-colored birds and certain monkeys that eat mud, in order to glean the salt from it."

"From the mud?" Missing said. "How can there be salt in mud?"

Esmariah paused a moment. "There is salt in everything," she said. "Everything. In your blood. In dirt. In rocks and trees and even in rain. Entire cultures have diverted their societal expansion just because they had to follow the salt deposits. Across the sea lies a country where the people bury their dead in salt, to preserve the corpses."

"Do they?" Missing's eyes widened.

"Apparently the idea is to look as good as possible when the Gods come for you," Esmariah said.

"Do they have a lot of gods there?"

"A few dozen, I believe. But that isn't the point. The point is what salt does for *us*. Since we discovered salt, we can ship meats back and forth and not be concerned with their spoiling. It is used as a curative, a spice, an item of trade, even as money. It is white gold. More precious than all this yellow gold we pride ourselves on and believe makes us rich."

"Oh," said Missing. "I never knew salt was so important."

"Few do. So many overlook it, sprinkling it over their dinner, perhaps spilling a few grains, never thinking what labor it took to bring those few grains to their table. The *cost* of that labor–the mining, the digging, the storing, the filtering–why, it could bring an honest merchant to ruin if one thing, *one single thing,* were to go amiss. So it would be worth something, wouldn't it, to have a way of mining salt that was nearly foolproof? A way to cut costs and still produce. It would be worth a lot, you see."

"I see," Missing said, though she didn't really. Salt was something bought in a sack at the market, put in the salt-cellar and used, well, on everything. Even when the bread was moldy, there were a few pennions for salt.

"You may go now." Esmariah turned to offer something from her pocket to Missing. It was a large piece of silver. Missing knew it was not much, but it was more than she had expected–about the same amount Aunt Orangia received for a week's worth of mending. She let it lie in her hand for a moment, cold and round, stifling the urge to give it back. There didn't seem much else for her to do, so she turned and left.

* * *

Esmariah Gasp listened to her go. She had been able to find out very little about Missing's heritage so far, despite all her resources. The Task lineage, of which Orangia was a part, had trickled out of a decades-old marriage to the second cousin of a fourth someone-or-other; distant enough that Esmariah had not bothered with it. It was Missing's that concerned her, and though she knew the girl's parents had been tinkers, she also knew they had given the child the ancient family name of Sealyham, seeming to indicate some relation. But the thread that led from Orangia to her sister's husband, who would have been the Sealyham, was blurred and vague and filled with knots.

Meanwhile, there was the difficult task of getting back through the room without looking at it too hard. Memories tugged persistently at the increasingly less resilient walls of her mind. It had been her mother's sitting room.

"Play with the puppy, Ezzy," the leviathan woman would encourage her infant daughter to keep her out of the way, handing her the little golden dog figurine. At that time Esmariah had only been a small hill, and her mother's lap a wide and warm expanse that seemed indestructible. Her mother had laughed a lot too, a sudden booming sound that startled new servants and sometimes made them drop things, to which her mother would laugh again, waving off the broken crockery as if it meant nothing to her. It probably hadn't.

Esmariah had not laughed in over a year. She knew this because the last laugh she had was not completely pleasant. She had laughed at Bray's news that the mines were not doing well, and that unless she could come up with more gold, they would have to begin taking salt from the enormous, naturally-formed pillars that were vital to keeping the whole place standing. If they began pillar-robbing, she ran the risk of toppling her own mine–as well as half the city. She laughed because she didn't know what else to do. There *was* no more gold in the family coffers.

That was the day she began stripping the rooms and walls of the Gasp House.

* * *

Missing wandered down the drive, unable to shake her sense of unease. The silver coin weighed heavily in her pocket. With this kind of money every week, Aunt Orangia could afford to cut back on her sewing. Perhaps even buy that new gray wool she had her eye on for a winter dress. Yet something about the money made Missing feel guilty and sick, and a whole host of complex emotions she did not have words for. She stepped out of the gate. A figure stepped out of the shadows to meet her.

"Hello," said Titus Sulk.

She was so startled she said the first thing that came to mind–"What are you doing here?"–rather than the coy greeting she would practice later and promise herself to use if she ever saw him again.

"I came to see you," he said. "Do you mind?"

"No. I just–I didn't think–I mean you–"

"I get bored with just the servants and my Gran. My sister's no help. She and those ninnies of hers have been out shopping all day. Can you imagine?" He rolled his eyes.

Missing smiled a little, wanting to tell him she couldn't imagine such a thing as spending money for eight hours, while wishing she had put her hair in a braid.

"What's it like, working in the Gasp House?" He fell into step with her.

"A little strange," she said. "But it pays well."

"Really? What sort of work do they have you doing?"

Missing sighed. "Right now, we're stripping the walls."

He laughed.

"No really," she said. "I spent the whole day stripping the gold off a portrait frame. It's for the mine." She lowered her voice. "They put together a whole wheelbarrow of gold things to pay for the mining."

"Oh?" He looked at her. "A wheelbarrow's worth?"

She nodded. "It's very sad, really."

"I'm sure. Do you like it? Working, I mean?"

"Well, I'd much rather go shopping all day, but I don't really have that option." She blushed a little. "Although my aunt and I aren't terribly poor. Not poor like begging poor. And I don't work *all* the time. I do other things."

Titus turned his gaze away to watch two men repair the door of a shop. "What kinds of things?"

"I write. Well, I try to." She faltered when she saw he wasn't really paying attention.

"That's important, I suppose. To have other things to do," he answered, turning back to her. "Well, nice to see you again." With that he turned abruptly away and hurried down a side-street.

Missing stared after him. For someone waiting to see her, he hadn't stayed very long. But, after all, he probably had more important things to do, and it was worthwhile to note he made the effort to come see her at all. Yet, as she continued home, she thought of her poem and decided she might just take out the part about him being a prince. He was definitely lordly material, but she didn't think that being a prince suited him as much as before. His eyes hadn't really been all that turgid, either. They were still a very nice shade of blue though. Perhaps "limpid" would work better.

Two things were waiting for her when she got home. The first was a message someone had scrawled across the wall-sharing houses in bright red paint:

Undrprivaliged masses of subordinat women unite against

There was a break for a small alley, then:

Mindless tirany and opreshon!

Several of the afore-mentioned underprivileged stood outside, united against the oppression of having to add cleaning the walls to their long day of work. It wasn't much, but most of those who lived in Penham-Wynek *owned* what they lived in, and that was a source of pride for them. This painting of walls wounded them deeply. The fact that it was badly misspelled made them even angrier, no matter what the message said.

The second thing that greeted Missing was the sight of Roger being propelled up the front steps of her house. The Inquisitor Morwin Croomb had hold of him by the neck of his shirt. Roger looked a little embarrassed. Croomb knocked firmly on her aunt's door. As Missing approached, her aunt answered.

"Hello, Orangia," Mister Croomb said. "This boy's been in a little trouble, and I remembered you took charge of him at the prison. I thought I'd just bring him along before the magistrate got a hold on him."

"Oh?" Her aunt's eyebrow rocketed skyward.

"Yes. Seems he tried to break into the Gasp mines this afternoon." The Inquisitor nodded. "Harmless really. Didn't get very far."

Suddenly they and the washing women were shaken by a mild but lingering tremor. There were cries of surprise as everyone in the street was forced to sit down abruptly or, in some cases, fell over. A shingle slid down off a roof and crashed to the cobblestones nearby.

"You see?" Roger crowed. "That's just what I was telling you about!"

He searched their faces for comprehension. Finding none, he turned to Missing. She, of all of them, understood the significance of it.

"Here, you! Inquisitor!" a nearby woman called out, scrambling to her feet. "You put my Nebbel in prison for a brawl last year. Well, what are you going to do about this?" She gestured at

the walls.

Morwin Croomb nodded. "The matter is being looked into Madame. Manking thanks you for your attention to civic duty," he added, retreating into Aunt Orangia's house.

Missing followed, noting that he seemed to have slathered something oily on his hair and wore a clean, official looking shirt. The hair pomade didn't smell particularly good, but the shirt was impressively arrayed over his burly frame. His beard was different too. As he steered Roger into the kitchen she realized he had dyed it a darker shade of gray. His cheeks were sweating a bit, and from the side she could just see where the dye crept out of the hair and up his skin in fungus-like splotches.

Once in the kitchen Aunt Orangia gave a small nod to Missing, indicating she should begin dinner. Meanwhile the woman sat down at the table with Roger and Croomb.

"I'm telling you," Roger said. "Something's gone wrong. That tremor we just felt is the second one in two days."

"Now, now," Mister Croomb said. "The king's advisors have warned us that there will be some disturbance from the coastal tides until they manage to get a quay built around the seashore in the Old District. That's all it was, surely."

"No, that *isn't* all it is," Roger argued. "The tide came in an hour ago. Look, I thought that too, in the beginning. That's why I came here, just to make sure. But the tremors don't happen exactly with the tides!"

There was an adult silence of mild reproach.

"It's true though," Missing spoke up. "Roger knew the first one was going to happen yesterday, just before it happened. We were in the prison, remember?" she asked her aunt, ignoring Roger's fatuous look of gratitude.

"Indeed." Orangia nodded. "I had to hold on to a nearby wall."

"Mmm," Mister Croomb said. "How do you know about these tremors, young man?"

Roger shrank back a little. "Well, you know. There're thaumic resonations that can be mapped in the ley lines, and the alignment of the stars of course, as well as–"

"He sees it in his buttons," Missing said. "He reads them like runes."

"Ah." Mister Croomb sat back. "Buttons. Runes. I see."

"No, you don't understand." Roger pushed his hair out of his eyes. "*I* know buttons don't seem like very good runes, but mine have always been accurate."

"Accurate. Yes," Mister Croomb said.

Missing appreciated the effort the Inquisitor was making, at least. He had not laughed once, nor shown the glimmer of a smile.

"I'll show you." Roger dug out his buttons. He cast them on the table-top. They all looked down, Missing leaning over his shoulder.

The buttons were all different colors and sizes and the pattern they fell in completely mysterious. But Missing did notice something he had pointed out to her once before. A small green button landed precisely to the left of a large bone button carved in the shape of a moose.

"The seventh ard always lands to the left of the ninth pell," she murmured. If this was all there was to reading runes, she thought, she could set up shop any day in the Shunts.

Roger grabbed her hand in his excitement. "Yes! That's it exactly! You see it too!"

Missing pulled her hand away. "I just saw the same thing you threw yesterday."

"There are men known for their skill at throwing dice that always turn up sixes," the Inquisitor said.

"Just–please–what can it hurt?–tell someone," Roger said. "Just the king, or, or *someone*. Just have them *look* in the mines. Whatever it is, it's down *there* and it might very well–"

"I hardly think this is the sort of thing the king needs be bothered with." Croomb waved his hand. "But you can be sure I'll point it out to my superiors, young man, and Manking thanks you for your attention to your civic duty."

"Civic duty?" Roger said. "I'm not even *from* here! I'm trying to warn you–"

"What if one of the mines is collapsing?" Aunt Orangia broke in. All conversation stopped. They turned to see her staring down at Roger's buttons. She turned her cool eyes on Croomb.

"After all, it's the three families who have control over them and pay taxes to the king," she said. "Does the king ever go down there? Of course not. With that they pay for their pieces, why would he need to? As long as they reassure him everything is all right…" She pursed her lips. "This entire city is built over those mines, Morwin. What if one of them *is* collapsing, and the Sulk-Sealyham-Gasps don't want us to know about it? Perhaps they think they can fix it before anything happens."

She looked up. "Would *that* be something the king might want to know about?"

In the silence that followed, Morwin Croomb sighed.

"When you put it that way, someone should probably bring it to his attention. I suppose that would be me."

Missing didn't envy him at all.

To be continued in the May 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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